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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

The Perceptions of Children Experiencing Parental Separation, Divorce, and Remarriage: An Approach Using the Critical Incident Technique

by

Wendy T. McDonald

A thesis

submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

in

Counselling Psychology

Department of Educational Psychology

Edmonton, Alberta

Spring 1989

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of Master of Education
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Date: 24th April '89

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to three groups of people:

To my supervisory committee: my supervisor, Dr. Don Sawatzky, for his enthusiasm and his insightful advice; my departmental committee member, Dr. William Hague, for his excellent suggestions; and my external committee member, Dr. Olive Yonge, for her excellent suggestions and for all the encouragement she has given me throughout both my undergraduate and graduate years.

To my parents-in-law: Marion and William Supynuk, for all their encouragement, support, baby sitting, and love.

To my loving husband: Allen Supynuk, for doing all my typing and editing and re-editing, and for reminding me this was all worthwhile.

Abstract

The objective of this study was to ascertain the perceptions of children experiencing the separation, divorce, and remarriage of their parents. To attain this objective, I posed questions relating to: what children perceived as the most stressful events; what they perceived as the most helpful events; what adult actions were helpful; what constituted successful adaptation; and what insights could be gained from examining successful and less successful remarried families.

My sample consisted of 6 remarried families. The people interviewed in each family included: the custodial parent; step parent; and resident children age 12 to 19. Altogether 24 people, 12 adults and 12 children, were interviewed. I used the Critical Incident Technique as my method of data collection and analysis.

Results of my analysis confirmed many findings in my literature review.

Major findings of the study were:

- All the children perceived parental conflict as stressful. Those who experienced the greatest conflict experienced the greatest degree of relief at the separation of their parents.

- The children who experienced an absent or infrequently visiting non-custodial parent suffered feelings of loss, rejection, anger, profound sadness, and yearning for that parent. This sometimes lasted for years.

- Children who adapted well to parental divorce had the following things in common: they were exposed to minimal conflict; both parents were actively involved in their care; both parents spent quality time with the children; neither parent spoke negatively about the other; and the parents explained what was happening during separation and divorce.

- Issues related to divided loyalty were perceived as very stressful in two aspects: when one parent talked negatively to the children about the other; and when children felt guilty about liking the step parent.

- Living in two households during the single parent years was perceived as initially stressful by the children experiencing it, but was quickly adapted to. Issues included: not being with friends on the weekend; and forgetting needed articles.

- Discipline was perceived as stressful when step parents were seen as too strict and having unrealistic expectations.

- Successfully integrated families had all existed for longer than 4 years. Characteristics of these families included: friendly step parent/child relationships; mutual decision making between spouses on discipline and rules (the custodial parent remained the main disciplinarian); allowing the children to adapt at their own pace; sharing activities as a family; and handling difficult issues with sensitivity.

- The degree of acting-out behaviour exhibited by the children in this sample was slightly higher than would be expected in the general population, occurring in 5 out of the 12 children. It included: running away from home; school ground fighting; drinking; and taking illegal drugs.

Table of Contents

Chapter		Page
I.	**Introduction - Objective of the Study**	1
II.	**Literature Review**	4
	1. General Review of Children of Separation and Divorce	5
	2. General Review of Children in Remarried Families	18
	3. Divorce and Remarriage Statistics	34
	4. Methodological Concerns When Studying Families in Transition	38
	5. Summation of Findings from the Literature Review	40
III.	**Methodology - An Overview of the Critical Incident Technique**	45
	a) The Aim of This Study	46
	b) Setting Plans, Specifications, and Criteria	47
	c) Data Collection	48
	d) Analysis of Data	48
IV.	**Findings of the Study**	51
	a) Demographic Data	51
	b) Description of Categories	58
	c) Reporting the Findings	64
V.	**Discussion**	95
	a) Summary of Findings, Alignment with the Literature Review, and Conclusions	96
	b) Discussion of the Findings with Implications for Parents and Counsellors	100
	c) A Summation of the Major Findings of this Study	116
	d) A Note on the Objectives of the Study	118
	e) Limitations and Delimitations of the Study	119
	f) Methodological Issues Arising from this Study	121
	g) Recommendations and Implications for Future Researchers	122
Bibliography		124
Appendix I - Critical Incident Technique Interview Guide		131

I. Introduction - Objective of the Study

In this thesis I explored the impact of divorce and remarriage on the family, emphasizing the children's perspective. I examined the relationships, coping strategies, successes, and failures as the family moved from crisis to adaptation. My objective was to answer questions about factors which influenced the adaptation of children at each stage. For example, what constituted successful and less successful relationships? What did the children perceive to be the most stressful events during these transitions? What events did children find to be most helpful? What actions by adults did children find to be most helpful? What constituted successful adaptation? What insights could be gained into how to create successful remarried families? It was my hope that the data collected and analyzed would give information that is useful both to the members of remarried families and to those counselling them.

Children who have become members of a remarried family have been through several losses or transitions: the loss of security during the separation and divorce of their parents; the transition to living in a single parent household (perhaps moving between two such households, both of which may have lost the feeling of being 'home'); and the transition to becoming a member of a remarried family (with the loss of the unique relationship with the parent; they must once again share the parent, this time with a stranger). Some time during this change many children will have to move to another house thereby losing the home and neighborhood they grew up in.

Due to these losses, the newly formed remarried family faces many challenging tasks. Not only does it have the same developmental tasks of any family, it also has the problems inherent to the remarried family situation. It must build new relationships while retaining old family ties. This requires insight to recognize and deal with potential problems.

The Critical Incident Technique was used to collect and analyze events, interactional patterns, relationships, and attitudes. Six remarried families, consisting of 24 interviewees,12 adults and 12 children (aged 12 to 19), formed the basis of the data collection. The incidents or events described which I deemed critical (ie. significantly affecting the outcome during transition periods) were collected during interview, then written up on 6 by 4 cards to categorize them. Each card contained: general information about the background and circumstances; specific information about what lead up to it; a description about what was or was not helpful; the agent who made the difference; and the ultimate outcome. The descriptions of the incidents were kept simple and brief. Where relevant, they were kept in the subjects own words by using direct quotes.

Some definitions are warranted: I use 'single parent family' to mean 'a family system with two households whether or not the households have equal importance and time in the child's life.' I use 'remarried family' to mean 'a domestic family in which one or both parents have children from a previous marriage. Those children live most of the time in that household which formed when an adult married a natural parent' (Winch, 1971).

The first chapter presents an extensive literature review of empirical findings and collective research in the areas of separation, divorce, and remarriage.

II. Literature Review

The literature review is broken into five parts:

1. Current empirical studies of children of separation and divorce, followed by a general review of the insights and collective research of people working with and researching these children. It includes: the general effect of divorce on children, destructive family patterns and their affect, and the children's perceptions of divorce.

2. Current empirical studies of children in remarried families, followed by a general review of the insights and collective research findings of people working with and researching these children. It includes: the general effect of remarriage on children, the children's perceptions of remarriage, and a stage perspective of the developmental tasks of the remarried family.

3. Divorce and remarriage statistics, including Canadian statistics and demographic data, and some implications.

4. Methodological concerns when studying families in transition.

5. A summation of findings from the Literature Review.

1. General Review of Children of Separation and Divorce

a) Children and Divorce - Current Empirical Studies

Wallerstein and Kelly (1975) conducted a study on a sample of 131 children aged 2 1/2 to 18 years belonging to 60 divorced families. Of these children, 34 were preschool aged 2 1/2 to 3 1/4; these children reacted to divorce with regression of toilet training habits, irritability, anxiety, sleep difficulties, cognitive confusion, increased tantrums, and aggressive behavior. The children in this age group who had not been given an explanation for the parents departure reacted regressively to the greatest degree. One year later, follow up indicated reduced regression, aggression, and anxiety in most children, except for those who experienced continued parental discord. The children aged 3 1/2 to 4 3/4 had less apparent regression but were irritable and experienced severe separation anxiety. They expressed a desperate desire for their non-custodial parent, if he or she was absent. By 5 to 6 years, anxiety and aggression became heightened reactions to divorce, as these children had more understanding of the family as a unit. They expressed their sadness and wished to restore the family. They exhibited depressive symptomology and poor self esteem.

In this same study, at latency age, 79 children were studied. In the group aged 6 to 8 (35 children), many were immobilized by psychic suffering, had extreme difficulty in obtaining relief from their inter-psychic stress, and demonstrated extreme sadness. The 9 to 12 year olds (44 children) perceived the family with reality, and were consciously struggling to deal with conflicts and fears and the need for the feeling of continuity. This group was ashamed of their parents divorce. They expressed intense anger

at their parents, and their activity and play were employed as coping strategies (ibid, 1976).

The adolescents in this group, aged 13 to 19, consisted of 18 children. They mourned their parent's divorce with extreme pain, anger, sadness, a sense of loss, and feelings of betrayal by their parents. They were ashamed, which prevented them sharing their feelings with friends. They were frightened by the idea of marriage in their own future (ibid, 1974).

A longitudinal multi-method study conducted by Heatherington et al (1979) examined responses of children and adults to the crisis of divorce. The sample consisted of 48 white middle-class families with pre-school children. The children exhibited negative behavior (they were less compliant, less affectionate and tended to whine and nag). Mother/son relationships deteriorated markedly and were associated with aggressiveness in the children. The study also found that parents were often left feeling lonely, depressed, and incompetent. Mothers felt trapped while fathers felt shut out. Communication and consistency of discipline with their children deteriorated. The researchers concluded that there was no such thing as a victimless divorce. This sample was homogeneous and can therefore be generalized to relevant families with pre-school children.

This same longitudinal study looked at the differences in the way pre-school boys and girls played, the themes they explored, and their pattern of social interaction following divorce. The researchers concluded that there was a restriction in both themes and general affect in their play, but such effects disappeared after one year in girls, while they were still apparent in boys two years later. Social interactions showed a similar pattern. The authors

concluded that the impact of divorce was most pervasive in boys, who appeared to have a greater adjustment problem than girls.

In a study by Fulton (1979) 560 divorced parents were asked to report on the impact of divorce on their children. They were interviewed two years after the final decree. The sample included 310 mothers and 250 fathers, 96% of whom were urban caucasians, with an average of 2.7 children. Two assessments were completed: the first a checklist of symptoms their children exhibited at the time of their separation; the second an assessment of how their children were affected during their divorce. All parents felt parental skills declined during divorce but improved following. Common symptoms the children exhibited included nightmares, bed-wetting, moodiness, temper tantrums, fears, truancy and headaches, with moodiness being the most common symptom. Of the parents, 30% felt their children were not affected by the divorce one way or the other, while 70% observed negative effects. These results were tempered by the fact that parents were strongly affected by their divorce, which in turn influenced their perceptions of their children. Thus, the parents with conflict surrounding their divorce were more likely to report negative responses than parents with less conflict.

McCombs et al (1987) studied adolescent functioning in the school setting following parental divorce. Variables investigated included parental conflict, support, and interaction between spouses. They found "the more that parents interact on non-parenting issues, the worse that teachers perceived the adolescent functioning, [both] cognitively and socially" (p 308). The researchers concluded that when ex-spouses began discussing their

new lives, the discussions both upset the adolescent and reduced the amount of quality time spent with them.

A study by R. Weiss (1979) tested the effect of single parenthood on adolescent children. It was based on interviews with single parents and their children. It concluded that "these children have to grow up a little faster" (p 98). Consequently, they appeared to be more mature than children living in two parent households. Parents commented most often on the changed roles and responsibilities in their children. This research was based on data collected by Harvard Medical School and consisted of over 200 single parents from a wide range of educational and occupational backgrounds. A control group of nuclear families were used for comparison. Children aged six to young adult were also interviewed.

Typically, children in single parent households were routinely expected to do more household duties and were held responsible for chores and the general functioning of the household. If they failed to perform, they were seen as failing the partnership responsibilities. Same aged children in two parent families were often seen as not being capable of the same task. This new definition of children as junior partners gave the children new rights and authority. They were more likely to be involved in family decision making, and their relationships to their parents were more peer oriented. Adolescents agreed with their parents that they moved earlier to maturity, but they also felt the experience was of mixed value. They cited increased feelings of insecurity, and learned to share their parents worries. They were particularly aware of financial pressures and frequently became the intermediaries in financial disputes between their parents. (ibid)

A similar study by Goldner (1976) concurred that such children either regressed or rose to the occasion, but that the majority of parents noted beneficial effects. He concluded that the long term effect on adolescents was that they seemed more capable of managing responsibility, and were more independent. They emerged without harm to their development providing earlier deprivation of nurturance did not occur.

Kulka and and Weingartern (1979) investigated the effects of parental divorce on children younger than 16, and consequential adult adjustment, using two cross-sectional surveys, 20 years apart. These surveys consisted of 2,460 respondents to a 1957 national USA survey and a 1976 replication study using 2,264 adults. Variables investigated included parental marital stability, and adjustment and psychological functioning in adulthood, in children of divorce compared to children with intact family backgrounds. Findings revealed that global adjustment was very similar in levels of happiness and extent of worrying in both sets of adults. However, a consistent difference emerged in the greater tendency of adults from divorced backgrounds identifying childhood or adolescence as their most unhappy or stressful time. They also reported feeling greater stress than the controls and were more likely to seek psychological treatment. "In neither survey year are there consistent differences by intactness of parental home on measures related to depression" (p 62). The adults from broken homes had the same levels of "personal efficacy, self-esteem, pleasurable involvement, and life satisfaction." (p 62) The researchers concluded that depression as a response to divorce decreased once the adult children of divorce realized that the loss they experienced could be overcome. Conclusions drawn from these surveys indicated that children

perceived parental divorce as a crisis, whose effect could not be discounted, but did wear out over time, with new modes of adaptation. "The notion that experiencing parental divorce during childhood is an important contributor to later life adjustment derives little support from these representative samples" (ibid, p 73). Being a self-report survey, this research may be highly inaccurate and subject to response bias. It was based on samples of adults living in households, and it therefore excluded many with severe problems of adjustment, such as the homeless (ibid).

A study by Santrock and Warschak (1979) asked what difference if any there was in competent social development between father custody and mother custody children. It compared 60 white, middle-class, children aged 6 to 11. Results indicated that boys in father custody families showed more competence socially than girls in father custody families. However, girls living with their mothers showed more social competence than boys in the same family structure. The authors concluded that these findings offered support to the importance of the presence of same sex parent to growing children. In fact, the most significant differences were on levels of demandedness and maturity, ie. boys were less demanding than girls in father custody while girls were less demanding than boys in mother custody. Findings were similarly significant on scores in levels of maturity, sociability, and independence in same sex children and parent families. The authors stressed these findings were preliminary and that multi-measure studies on children in father custody families needs to take place before conclusions are drawn.

A study by DeFrain and Erick (1981) found only one statistical difference in their replies on a 63 item questionnaire on child raising. This difference

referred to parental encouragement that children 'take sides.' They compared 33 divorced custodial fathers with 38 custodial mothers. A third of the fathers admitted that they encouraged their children to take sides in parental disputes, while only one mother admitted to this. All other measures of child rearing practices indicated that mothers and fathers as custodial parents were quite similar.

Another study by Little (1972) found that custodial mothers stated that their children rarely expressed appreciation for parental effort. In comparison, custodial fathers stated their children often expressed their appreciation. Children of lower income custodial mothers were said to be more difficult to handle than children of higher income mothers. It was hypothesized from these results that children expected their mothers to take care of them, and parenting by fathers was more novel. Lower income mother custody children may have held their mothers responsible for their depravations; whereas men generally received higher wages than women, and consequently their custodial children were less likely to suffer.

An interview study by Watson (1981) of fathers having joint custody found these men were child orientated, and had been involved in child care from the beginning. Neither parent had wanted child involvement to lessen after divorce. The men felt their children benefited from exposure to two different lifestyles and two different sets of values. Moreover, they felt that strong agreement between parents on decision making, scheduling, and geographic location was required to make joint custody work,

b) General Effects of Separation and Divorce on Children

This section is based on insights and collective research findings of people working in the field.

Heatherington in Parke (1982) found that children often perceived parental divorce as the beginning of their difficulties, rather than a solution. Their natural reaction was negative, due to the loss of familial stability. Depending on their developmental status, this loss produced anger, anxiety, depression, or dependency.

Tessman (1978) found that how children handled separation, and the amount of time required to adjust to it, was directly related to the way the family had handled affection, disagreement, and stress. According to Whiteside (1982), when the children were disturbed the family was disturbed. The reverse was not always true.

> "A couple which has been able to keep their conflict largely within the marital dyad, remaining mutually supportive in their roles as parents, is more able to form arrangements in the best interests of the child; they may be able to carry out successfully a joint custody arrangement. These children will necessarily have feelings of responsibility for the divorce, and will distort events, but their reactions will be more a temporary adjustment, a reaction to transition, than a continuing structuralized conflict" (ibid, p 61).

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that children's defence mechanisms were often employed as an insulation against reality. For example, because of the shake-up in their sense of security, regression often occurred, taking them back to a stage that spelled security. Clinging, whining, and seeking attention and reassurance from adults also occurred. Somatic symptoms frequently exhibited themselves in headaches, stomach-aches (especially in younger children) and fatigue (especially in adolescents). These responses

were regarded as normal and typically lasted about two months. If they did not end within that time, there was reason to believe that the children had not come to terms with the divorce and might require professional help from the school psychologists or another professional.

Pfeffer (in Stuart and Abt, 1981) found that the basic environment needed for children to survive required emotional, social, and cognitive stimulation. This helped ensure reality testing, impulse control, moral stability, affect regulation, and the ability to disengage during adolescence.

To fulfill the needs of the children the single parent faces many challenges:

> "Special parental responsibilities include meeting the emotional and nurturing need of the child, providing financial security, and furnishing a model for self-esteem and social adjustment of the child. One of the main difficulties for the single parent is preoccupation with these tasks, and inability to provide sustenance to the child who is coping with the loss of a parent and the uncertain availability of the other parent. As a result, a major task of the single parent is to provide a state of object constancy, and to furnish figures for identification for the child" (ibid, p 25).

According to Diamond (1985), children of divorce may have concerns: Will they be abandoned? If the parents stopped loving each other, will they also stop loving them? She says that children feel vulnerable and anxious. McDermot (1970) says they are also at risk for acting out behavior rather than for neurosis. Symptoms include: running away from home, poor school and at home behavior, and delinquency. Frequently, these children are found to be clinically depressed, when compared to children from intact homes.

c) Destructive Family Patterns and Their Effect on Children

This section is based on insights and collective research findings of people working in the field.

According to Beal (1980), the degree to which children are influenced by divorce depends primarily on two issues: first, how much emotional attachment or conflict exists between the parents; and second, how much parents focus emotional processes on their children. For example, when children are the focus of parental anxiety they may begin to share that emotional anxiety and begin to worry.

Hains (in Stuart, 1972) says that in some homes, characterized by struggles for control, children may be used as hostages. That is, they are drawn into their parents marital conflict. For example, the children may be used as a punitive weapon to deprive one parent of the children's company, or they may be used to maintain a dying marriage. This may force them into a coalition with one parent against the other. Obviously they are affected negatively by this experience - they may passively submit, or become aggressive and act-out. Ultimately, they might manipulate the situation to their advantage.

Wallerstein (in Kelly, 1980) say that if the parent makes no effort to shield children from the consequences of parental conflict, the children may be exposed to outbursts of anger and threats of violence. "These embittered, chaotic parents make little, if any effort to shield their youngsters from witnessing or overhearing angry confrontations" (p 156). She goes on to say they obtain no tranquility, and in such a home the end of the relationship spells relief to the children in most instances.

Conflict, both parent/parent and parent/child, can lead to behavioral disorders in children (Emery and O'Leary, 1982). The relationship between conflict and behavior is found more consistently in boys than in girls. This may be because boys seem to be more exposed to conflict than girls (Heatherington in Parke, 1982). However, if children have not been exposed directly to this conflict no psychopathology occurs (Porter and O'Leary, 1980). Likewise, when children are delivered into a more stable, one-parent household, they escape the conflict and their complete adjustment is more likely. Conclusions from these findings lead one to believe that conflict and not separation accounts for behavioral problems, especially as death of a parent has not been shown to lead to behavioral disorders in boys (Heatherington in Parke, 1982).

Role reversal sometimes occurs when children are asked to give psychological support by a parent. Edward Beal (1979) noted in his study (which used the family systems perspective) that families which held a "high child focus" (ie. a mechanism by which family members deal with stress by focusing their anxieties on the children) used this 'child focus' as a major mechanism for dealing with anxiety. "The parents for whom children were a major emotional focus for the marriage in the first place, when under mental stress, would readily then turn to their children as a way of seeking comfort and reducing anxiety" (p 149). In such families, where parental anxiety is high, the parents typically have difficulty communicating with their children; divorce decisions are made abruptly, often without explanations to the children (Emery and O'Leary, 1982).

Upon separation from one parent, children may grieve in the same way they would for the death of the parent. Since the divorce is a willfully

decided occurrence, this has the potential to be worked through and discussed before separation. The children can express anger, anxiety, and sadness then re-establish a new kind of relationship with each parent.

d) Divorce from the Children's Perception and Experience

This section is also based on insights and collective research findings of people working in the field.

According to Wallerstein and Kelly (1980), the vast majority of the children preferred their parents unhappy marriage to a divorce. Very few children thought their parents were unhappy prior to divorce. They did not view the divorce as a release or a solution to unhappiness, nor did they view it this way for many years. Not until the adolescent years were the children able to identify with either parent's wish to escape. Many of them were happy in the home and considered themselves as happy as any of their peers. Very often, the announcement of divorce struck the children like a bolt of lightning, and they experienced heightened vulnerability because:

> "Their assurance of continued nurturance and protection, which had been implicit in an intact family, had been breached: they confronted a world which suddenly appeared to have become less reliable, less predictable, and less likely in their view to provide for their needs and their expectations. Their fears were myriad. Some were realistic, others were not. The specific content of the worry varied with age and child and family, but the anxiety itself was a widespread phenomena, and appeared as a central response" (ibid, p 45).

Kelly (1981) says that when their fears have been realized and one parent ceases active involvement, children mourn profoundly for their non-custodial parents even when that relationship was not gratifying prior to divorce. Heatherington et al (1978) says that the quality of the relationship between non-custodial parents and children is a significant factor in the successful adjustment of the children after the divorce.

The next part deals with the effect of remarriage on these children.

2. General Review of Children in Remarried Families

In remarried families, a common history does not evolve in the same way that it does over time in the nuclear family. Alienation is therefore the usual feeling during the initial period of formation, before a common history and culture develops. Family feelings cannot be willed or forced, but must evolve with time. All remarried families must accomplish the task of forming a family:

> "At the same time, they must function as a family further along in the family life cycle. In other words, they must operate as if they had developed the complex inner structure of a family who has been together at least as long as the age of the oldest child. While actually possessing only the rudimentary structure of a family just starting out. In short, they must function at 2 stages of the life cycle at once" (Goldner in Messinger, 1982, p 196).

The rate of divorce in remarried families is higher than the rate for first marriages. Studies indicate that the direct reason for this is marital instability (Lutz, 1983). Stress created by the presence of step children, as a source of difficulty, was ranked highest in 70 remarried couples interviewed during a study of child rearing patterns. This was in contrast to the greatest source of difficulties in first marriages, usually cited as the immaturity of one partner (Messinger, 1986).

Remarriage of the custodial parent may appear as a second loss to children. Feelings of abandonment, rejection, and divided loyalty often result instead of feelings of gaining another parent. Step parents may be seen as intruders. Sometimes step parents are faced with helping children deal with loss, anger, and guilt, while at the same time they must face their own feelings of jealousy, resentfulness, and disappointment at the attention given their step children by their spouse (Larsen et al, 1984).

a) Children in Remarried Families - Current Empirical Studies

Membership in the remarried family needs to be defined. A study by Gross (1987) attempting to do this asked a non-random sample of 30 male and 30 female children aged 16 to 18 years whom they included as family members. It also asked about their relationship with each biological and step parent in an attempt to define the family. Traditionally, the remarried family had been regarded as a negative deviation from the nuclear family, which was regarded as the 'prototype' of normality (p 205). Gross noted that the remarried family was different from the nuclear family and so it did not fit into the typical format of 'existing models of kinship' (p 207). The aforementioned study attempted to create a typology which could then be used to define types of remarried families from the children's perspective. Four types of families emerged:

a) 'Retention' - these children included both biological parents but not the step parent. Even when living with the step parent they did not regard him as a family member. Of the 60 children studied, 20 (33%) were found in retention. Step parents were found not to be an important part of these children's lives, and half of them reported negative relationships with their step parent.

b) 'Substitution' - children in remarried families who excluded biological parent and included one step parent as a family member. (This is the traditional view of the remarried family.) Of the 60 children, 8 (13%) were in substitution, and they typically excluded the non-resident parent. In this sample females accepted step parents more readily than males.

c) 'Reduction' - these children not only excluded the step parent but also the non-resident biological parent. Of the 60 children, 15 (25%) fell into this category. Age at remarriage played an important part in this group, and was higher than average. Remarriage had typically just taken place, and step parents were not actively involved with these children. The children had negative feelings towards the step parent.

d) 'Augmentation' - these children included both biological and step parents in their family. Step parents were seen as additions rather than replacements. Of the 60 children, 17 (28%) fell into this category, and most were in father custody with step mothers. The non-custodial parent being an involved mother may have been a factor in the children's attitude. The author stressed the fact that this was a small, non-random sample and that these categories were exploratory. He felt that the children's point of view should be taken into account much more frequently than present studies tend to do (ibid).

A study by Duberman (1975) which measured the levels of family interaction, interviewed 85 remarried couples. The families with the highest integration had the following conditions: the new spouse had been divorced rather than single; the new spouse had custody of children from the previous marriage (especially important for the wife); step mothers had younger step children; and extended family approval of the marriage existed. Other findings suggested that men who had left their children behind with their ex-wives did as well as bachelors did. Step mother/step daughter relationships were the most problematic of all. Family integration was found to be much less when the extended family acted indifferently or was cut off.

A study by Lutz (1983) investigated stress in the remarried family from the adolescent perspective. The sample of 103 boys and girls aged 12 to 19 were given a questionnaire focusing on 11 categories cited in the general literature as stressful to children. These categories were: discipline, divided loyalty, absent biological parent, the children as members of two households, desire that parents reunite, unrealistic expectations, social attitudes, compounded loss, family constellation, sexual issues, and pseudo-mutuality. Results were very surprising; 9 of the categories were generally responded to as "non-stressful."

The results in the categories 'divided loyalty' and 'discipline,' agreed with previous results. Within the category 'divided loyalty,' the item deemed most stressful was having one parent talk negatively about the other parent. (This has great implications for the handling of children's feelings during periods of transition.) Discipline was ranked second; this was particularly difficult for the older adolescent, who is naturally going through a period of testing and rebellion. (The issue of discipline must be addressed if the family is to run smoothly, especially in the first two years.)

The two least stressful categories were 'member of two households' and 'social attitudes' (having to explain to peers and others about living in a step family situation). Lutz suggested in her findings that step family life might not be as stressful as previous literature indicated.

An Australian study by Amato and Ochiltree (1987) examined the correlation between adolescent competence and family background, using 201 intact families, 55 step families, and 89 single parent families. It revealed that children living in single parent homes did not seem to be at

risk or at disadvantage when developing competency. Adolescents from single parent families proved to be equal to intact family adolescents. However, adolescents from step families demonstrated lower abilities in reading and impulse control; they also had lower scores on self-esteem. The authors concluded that having a new parent created debilitating effects, as opposed to losing an old parent. They were quick to stress that these findings were preliminary and that further analysis was required. More in-depth inquiry into family process measures, to discover which intervening variables are operating, was thought to be required.

A study by Halperin and Smith (1983) compared children's perceptions of step fathers with biological fathers. They included 70 children from step families and 70 from intact families. The children were aged from 10 to 12 years and were a mix of afro-american and caucasian. The authors found that "step children perceived both their step fathers and their natural fathers less positively and more negatively than the control children perceived their natural fathers" (p 25). These differences might have been explained by the numerous anxieties and stresses created during the transition to a remarried family. Such situations were not faced by the control group.

An Australian study (Amato, 1987) used a representative sample of children from 113 schools. Altogether, 1,340 children from grades 3 and 4 and 1,234 adolescents in grade 10 and 11, were asked to complete a questionnaire on their families. These were then classified into intact, single parent, and step families. Of these families, 402 were then selected for interviews probing the effect of divorce and remarriage on their adjustment and general development. Results indicated that neither

divorce nor remarriage seemed to effect the children's perceptions of the degree of support given by their mothers. The children, originally in single parent families, who then obtained a step parent, found that the support and love they lost from biological fathers was gradually replaced by their step fathers. This was especially true once the remarriage was firmly established. Children of single parents had a good deal of housekeeping duties but did not have more autonomy than children in intact families. Single parent families tended to be less cohesive.

A multi-method, multi-measure study (Clingempeel et al, 1984) assessed the quality of step parent/step child relationships in 16 step mother and 16 step father families. The methods of collecting data included self ratings, interviews, and behavioural ratings. Results indicated that, regardless of whether it involved a step father or step mother, step daughter relationships were more problematic than step son relationships. Self ratings of love were lower and detachment ratings were higher for girls. Behavioural measurements revealed that girls had fewer positive verbal behaviours, and higher numbers of negative problem solving behaviours, towards their step parents, when compared to boys. However, step parents did not show behavioural differences in their responses to boys or girls on any of the measurments.

A 3-way longitudinal and cross-sectional study (Ambert, 1986) interviewed 96 remarried persons and their spouses. It found conclusively that the experiences of step parents were more positive with live-in step children than with children living with the other parent. This was true for both step mothers and step fathers, and both reported they were closer to live-in children. However, these step parents had a great deal of ambivalence

about the step parenting experience. This was especially true for the step mothers.

A study conducted by Fine (1986) collected information from 175 college students with a mean age of 19 years. The students were from intact, single parent, and step families. The purpose of the study was to test the perceptions of college students regarding step parents, compared with biological parents. Results indicated these young adults had generally negative stereotyped perceptions of step parents, especially of step mothers. "Ratings of step parents were essentially average, while evaluations of natural parents were considerably above average" (p 541). The students from step families and single parent families had less stereotyped perceptions of step mothers than did students of nuclear families. All the step family and single parent children had previously lived with their mothers. The researcher concluded that these results were consistent with the notion that difficulties facing step families in general may be linked to negative expectations.

Ganong and Coleman (1984) did a meta-analysis of 38 empirical studies of the effect of remarriage on children. They compared these results to discover what conclusions could be drawn. They concluded from their survey that no conclusions could be drawn on the effects of remarriage on children. They did state however that "in general, there is little reported evidence that children in step families differ significantly from children in other family structures" (p 401). Step children did not appear different in levels of self esteem, cognitive development, psychosomatic symptoms, personality characteristics, IQ scores, or school grades than children in intact families. Questions remained regarding how they differed in

mental health and psychological development. The studies relating to social development were very markedly different, with two studies showing that step children were less well developed and less satisfied with their family relationships. However, most social development studies suggested step children evidenced no more problems in social behavior in general than other children. The gestalt of these studies revealed "remarriage of parents does not significantly relate to problem behavior or negative attitudes towards self and others in step children" (p 402). The authors stressed that the body of research was small, and plagued with inconsistences and methodological problems. Furthermore, the studies were characterized by the use of a "deficit-comparison model," which compared step children with children in intact families, with the assumption that step children were at some kind of deficit. Clinical writers likewise argued against this model because step families are both structurally and dynamically different from nuclear families (Visher and Visher, 1979).

b) General Effects of Remarriage on Children

This section is based on insights and collective research findings of people working in the field.

Crohn, et al (in Stuart and Abt, 1981) found that children's reaction to parental remarriage could be predicted by examining the way their parents adapted to the loss of their first mate. If parents could not mourn successfully, they may not have provided ways for their children to mourn, and so their children remained emotionally rooted in the old nuclear family. Consequently, children resisted acceptance of the new parent. They concluded that the degree of bonding between custodial parents and children may make it difficult for the children to relinquish this exclusive relationship and make room for the step parent. The time between marriages may make children more rigid to change. When the custodial parent remarries, this can create more problems, as their children are more likely to be disrupted from their primary household. Continued parental conflict made it more difficult for the children to adapt to the remarriage as they may have had to play messenger, or spy on one parent's life for the other parent.

McGoldrick and Carter (1980) found that children entering the reconstituted family have a history which may make them emotionally sensitive to the new relationships they are expected to form. They may close up to protect themselves because of this vulnerability to further hurt, or they may be demanding of the new relationship in an attempt to erase previous hurts. Also, new problems emerge immediately with outside contacts: How do they explain why their mother or brother has a different name from

them? How do they deal with being a middle child when previously they were the oldest?

Children question their new abode: Where is my space? Where do I belong? Who's in charge of me? Who disciplines me or gives me my pocket money? Who are the members of my family? They may not like their new step parent or the step parent may not like them. The step parent may try too hard. Divided loyalties arise as children almost always feel natural loyalty to their non-custodial natural parent (ibid).

Messinger (1984) found a result of many studies was that it takes about two years for stabilization to occur. Many factors play a part. For example, when an older custodial father with adolescent children marries a young, previously single woman, a lengthy period of adjustment is required for adolescents to accept this young person who is taking their mother's place. The wife, hoping for romance, may instead be faced with adolescent conflict and resentment. A more difficult situation existed if the younger woman was previously married with younger children, where the likelihood of establishing a stable household pattern was less likely. Younger children require a different kind of care and responsibility, whereas the adolescent wants freedom to come and go without accountability to adults. Wald (1981) found that marriage partners who are at the same life cycle phase have some advantages as they face the same life cycle tasks. Conflict can occur due to: the sheer overload of tasks needing to be done; differing methods of child rearing; and differing philosophies.

Visher and Visher (1979) found that children entering the remarried family have several issues to contend with, including: the continued

mourning over parental loss; guilt about causing the divorce; unreasonable expectations; sexuality issues; giving up fantasies about the reunion of their natural parents; and being a member of two households. As they attempt to deal with these issues, their behavior may be affected with problems arising at school, and acting out behavior. Pre-school aged children have been found to adjust quite easily to the new family, especially if they are given high quality nurturance. Latency aged children have difficulties with divided loyalties, and teenagers adjust the least.

McGoldrick and Carter (1980) found that many issues are unique to teenagers. For example, just as the step family is pushing for cohesiveness, they are concentrating on separation and independence. They are much more likely to deal with feelings of divided loyalty by taking sides, or even playing one side against the other. They resist the shift of their customary role in the family, and resent learning new roles and developing new relationships, when they are concerned with independence from the family. Sexual issues arise with possible sexual attraction to the new step parent or step siblings; some have difficulty in accepting the reality that their parent is a sexual being.

c) Children's Perceptions of Remarriage

This section is also based on insights and collective research findings of people working in the field.

Messinger (1986) says that we need to understand that children are dealing with a changed system, where often the members are new and in increased numbers. The rules are no longer the same, and may not be clear. For example, if the children ask the step parent for help with homework, what are the implications on their natural non-custodial parent? Their step siblings may feel they are imposing on *their* time with *their* father. Also, they may have to move backwards and forwards between two households in which they must continue to find their place, as the systems and rules may be quite different in each.

Sager et al (1983) say that from a positive perspective, children may now be exposed to a stable, healthy parental relationship instead of a destructive one. They may receive more care and attention from parent, step parent, step siblings, step grandparents, or other relatives. The multiplicity of personality styles and values add to their experience of the world. The step parent may be a gentle, caring person, as opposed to the non-custodial biological parent, who may have been cold and aloof.

Messinger (1976) says that a pseudo independence may have developed in children during the parent's phase as a single parent, when the children may have been left to their own devices or even been left to care for younger siblings. When the new step parent comes on the scene, the children may feel resentment and hostility for the removal of these freedoms or responsibilities. Fear of another abandonment may make them repress

their hostility, or they may project hostility felt towards their own parent onto the step parent. Consequently they may feel depressed and withdrawn, or they may act out feelings of hostility.

d) Developmental Tasks of the Remarried Family - A Stage Perspective

When comparing the remarried family with the nuclear family from a family stages perspective, the nuclear family can typically be said to go through four stages in life as follows:

1) marriage of the couple
2) expansion and stabilization of the couple through the addition of children, with further stabilization through child rearing
3) contraction of the family due to the adolescent children leaving home
4) restabilization of the couple without children

By comparison, Wald (1981) found that the life cycle of the remarried family have the same four stages and an additional three stages which include:

5) Dissolution of the nuclear family (due to divorce or death)
6) contraction to the single parent state
7) re-expansion and reconstitution to the remarried family state

When establishing the nuclear family (stage 1) the developmental task is to create a balance of marital interests as opposed to self interests. This is in order to allow the unit to become a viable, complementary, working relationship in which bonding and positive interactions prevail (ibid).

Once the first child is born (stage 2) the unit expands its boundaries and gives up some freedom in order to take on the task of nurturing and raising the child. Individual goals and needs, and developmental needs, must now be integrated to create a harmonious lifestyle, and to forge a family identity. The developmental task of this stage is 'stabilization' versus 'dissolution' as a two-parent, two-generation nuclear family (ibid).

The marital unit may now undergo the process of dissolution (stage 5). The developmental age of the children has implications for later adjustment. Multiple separations and reconciliations often occur before the final separation and 'Decision versus Ambivalence' becomes the ultimate developmental task. This task is intertwined with the developmental tasks specific to the ages and socialization levels of the children. Once the family breaks up, the developmental task becomes that of 'successful grief and mourning' versus 'denial of loses' (ibid).

The actual loss of the marital status and single parenthood (stage 6) has the primary developmental task of 'coping' versus 'disorganization' which requires adapting to a new lifestyle, establishing new rules and routines, and coping with stresses. As the single parent and children are often stigmatized, they often do not receive the empathy they deserve. One of the children at this stage may assume the role of parent surrogate or the distinction between parent and child roles may become blurred. Power struggles between parents, visitation rites, custody rites, and support are often played out through the children. The mourning process ebbs and flows and crises occurs frequently, making the children's feelings of loss more apparent. Often the children do not feel able to talk to the custodial parent about their feelings for the absent parent, and parents feel likewise, with the result that bonds built through recognition of mutual loss do not take place. Eventually, the single parent creates a new relationship with a potential mate, and the children's response to this varies (ibid).

The formation of the remarried family (stage 7) introduces the step parent relationship and the two parent, two generation family structure re-emerges (cf stage 2). Developmental complexity occurs due to the following

factors: prior parent/child bonding, step role ambiguities, the lack of shared developmental ties, and unshared socialization and nurturance of the children. Now the developmental tasks specific to stage 2 of any family take precedence, namely 'stabilization' versus 'dissolution' and 'marital interest' versus 'self interest.' At the same time, unfinished business from the previous family still exists for children with identity issues, unsolved mourning, fantasy of biological parent reunion needing to be given up, and lowered self esteem (ibid).

Stages 3 and 4 occur the same as they would for a nuclear family.

The next part gives some Canadian statistics about divorce and remarriage.

3. Divorce and Remarriage Statistics

a) Canadian Divorce Statistics

"Most Canadians probably feel that marriage is for life, that it is inviolable in the face of all but the most extreme difficulty. Yet a significant proportion of them will experience a family breakdown and divorce sometime in the course of their lives" (Statistics Canada, 1983, p 236). The Divorce Act of 1968 expanded the grounds on which divorce could be granted, and since that time more people have chosen divorce as the solution to marital breakdown. In 1971, 1 in 5 marriages were expected to end in divorce, by 1985, this figure had reached almost 1 in 3 (Adams and Nagnur, Stats Canada, 1988).

Accordingly, the expectation of living in the divorced state has doubled, rising to 2.3 years for males and 4.6 years for females. The Marital Status Life Tables for 1984 to 1986 indicate that the proportion of marriages ending in divorce has remained at 29%, or 3 out of 10 marriages. Single State Tables for 1984 to 1986 indicate that of a cohort of 100,000 married males over the age of 15, 4 out of 10 (41.2%) could expect to divorce prior to age 80. The female equivalent is 39.6% (ibid).

b) Canadian Remarriage Statistics

Many people whose first marriage failed are still willing to risk remarriage. "In 1985, for example, in 27% of marriages at least one spouse was remarrying from the divorced state. This suggests that many divorcees are not so much disillusioned with the institution of marriage as they were with this [sic] particular marriage" (Adams and Nagnur, Stats Canada, 1988, p 14).

However, divorcees are less likely to remarry today than they were in 1971. A divorced man's chances of remarrying has recently dropped from 85% to 76%, while a woman's chances has gone down twice as much, from 79% to 64% (Statistics Canada, 1986). The time between divorce and remarriage for men has risen from one year, in 1971, to two years, in 1985. Women waited two years in 1971, and 2.3 years in 1985. Taking into account that not all divorcees remarry, people are now spending longer in the divorced state, with the time doubled since 1971 - 3 years for men, and 5 years for women (Statistics Canada, 1985). Comparisons across the country show that the number of divorcees who remarry is lower in Quebec than in the rest of the country, with 62% of men, and 46% of women remarrying.

c) Demographic Data

Glick (1979) found divorce to occur more often in couples who marry before age 20 and after the age of 30. Premarital pregnancy and downward mobility lead to increased risk of divorce. College educated women have a lower risk than non-college educated women; women with a post graduate education have a greater risk than women with just an undergraduate degree.

d) Implications from the Above Statistics

Messinger (1984) found that in Canada, half a million children have experienced divorce in the last 10 years, 60% of them minors. Remarriages fail 44% of the time, which is 6% higher than first marriages. Of children born in the 1970's, half are expected to experience parental divorce, and the majority will become step children. Einstein (1982) says that at present, one child in 5 to 8 is a step child. Schlesinger (1981) says that in 1981, 67,909 Canadians married for the second time, 82% of these were divorcees (as opposed to widows). One out of four marriages had at least one partner who had previously been married. Heatherington (in Parke, 1984, USA) found that in 1970, 85% of children under 18 years of age lived with both parents; in 1982, this fell to 75%. In 1970, 9% of children lived with a divorced mother, and 1% with the father; in 1982, it was 14% with mother and 2% with father.

Messinger (1984) concludes from these statistics that a large proportion of children will spend some part of their childhood living with a step parent. Society must now face the responsibility of recognizing that a new culture, 'step family', now exists and is already full grown. It can not be viewed as deviant from the more common family structures. From a theoretical standpoint, we appear to be acknowledging this, however socially, culturally, and legally, problems are still apparent.

The next part gives some methodological concerns.

4. Methodological Concerns When Studying Families in Transition

Not only are statistical problems apparent, but criticism has frequently been forthcoming in the design of studies of families of the divorced and the remarried. According to Heatherington et al (in Parke, 1984):

> "Primary among these problems are the lack of the appropriate comparison groups and the failure to identify whether the single parent status is due to death, divorce, or separation. Factors such as age, sex, and developmental status of the child and the parents at the onset of separation are often not specified" (p 401).

Heatherington has criticized the research, saying that often, despite large representative samples, no attention was given to establishing validity or reliability. When psychologists *did* pay attention to reliable and valid techniques they used too small samples, which were from clinical populations rather than general populations. Research designs also viewed divorce or remarriage as a single event rather than a transition involving many events over an extended period of time. All variations in responses of each member of the family need to be examined in relation to conditions in the family, for example, changes in socio-economic status.

Esses and Campbell (1984) say that in the researcj literature on the remarried family, it was frequently found that samples were not only too small, but also non-representative; typically they were caucasian middle class families who volunteered their time, or were those who required therapeutic assistance. Methods employed were typically open ended interviews and questionnaires, both of which lack reliability and validity. Most important, the step family was viewed as deviant and pathological in comparison to nuclear families. Questionnaires and interview questions were geared towards deleterious effects existing in step family members.

Esses and Campbell (1984) note that the reason why there were so many problems in studying the step family are because there was "no adequate theoretical model of step family functioning to guide the researcher in formulating research problems" (p 416). As a consequence of this lack of a blueprint, the formulating of hypotheses was vulnerable to researcher bias. Very little was known about the successful step family, where positive coping mechanisms were being successfully applied. Research questions reflecting these successes and using longitudinal follow up methods need to be formulated.

A measure of the size and composition of the remarried population does not accurately exist to aid in developing a representative sample. The complex structure in some remarried families makes selection of interviewees difficult. For example, should the absent biological parent be included? Many studies have relied on interviewing only one member of the family, with the results that obtaining large, random, representative step family samples has been forfeited (ibid).

The next part summarizes these findings.

5. Summation of Findings from the Literature Review

Empirical studies of separation and divorce reveal that children react differently according to age. ie. with regression of toilet training, sleep disorders and behaviour change during pre-school, with less affection and compliance at 3 to 4 (Fulton, 1979, Wallerstein et al, 1974, Heatherington et al, 1979). By 5 to 6, with anxiety and aggression, at 7 to 8 with sadness, at 9 to 10 with psychic conflict (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979). Research on adolescents revealed mourning, extreme pain, anger, sadness, loss, and shame which made them reluctant to share their feelings with friends (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975). Other studies revealed increased maturity and independence with the taking on of greater responsibility during the single parent years (Weiss, 1979, Goldner, 1976). They also felt less secure when parents talked about non-parenting issues (ie. their parents new lives). Teachers reported decreased functioning cognitively and emotionally in these adolescents (McCombs, 1987). Adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood experienced greater levels of stress, but few other differences with those coming from intact families (Kulka et al, 1979). Studies on custody reveal: greater social competence with the same sex parent (Santrock et al, 1979); little difference in encouragement to take sides in a dispute (DeFrain et al, 1981); less appreciation expressed by mother custody children (Little, 1972); and greater parental satisfaction in joint custody arrangements (Watson, 1981).

General collective insights and research findings on children experiencing separation and divorce reveal that the way they handle it psychologically reflects how their parents handle it (Tessman, 1978). They may exhibit defence mechanisms and have somatic complaints (Wallerstein et al, 1980).

If conflict is a factor, transition will not be smooth, as such children develop anxiety and often engage in acting-out behaviour (McDermot, 1970, Emery et al, 1982, Wallerstein, 1980). Conversely, if parents remain actively involved in their care and children are not exposed to more than minimal conflict, equilibrium will be gained quickly (Wallerstein, 1980, Emery et al, 1982). Around 2 months is normally required for adjustment in such instances (Wallerstein, 1980). If one parent becomes absent following separation, the children suffer profoundly (Emery et al, 1982).

Empirical studies on remarriage reveal that children vary in whom they regard as family members as follows: both parents but not the step parent; the custodial parent and step parent but not the non-custodial parent; only the custodial parent; and both parents and the step parent (Gross, 1987). Families with high integration typically reveal: the new spouse is a divorced custodial parent; step mothers have younger children; and extended family support is present (Duberman, 1975). Levels of children's stress are mostly frequently related to problems of discipline, especially in older adolescents, and divided loyalties, especially when one biological parent talks negatively about the other (Lutz, 1983). Adolescents in step families have lower reading scores, lower self-esteem, and poorer impulse control (Amato et al, 1987). Biological and step fathers are perceived more negatively by step children than by children from intact families (Halperin, 1983), while mothers are viewed as supportive by both groups (Amato et al, 1987). Step daughter/step parent relationships are the most problematic (Clingempeel et al, 1984, Duberman, 1975). Parenting experiences are better for step parents when step children live in (Ambert et al, 1986). A meta-analysis of 38 empirical studies concluded that no conclusions about

the effect on children living in remarried families can be drawn, but that generally there is little evidence to support the theory that step children differ in any way from children in other family structures (Ganong et al, 1984).

General insights on children experiencing parental remarriage reveal they may react as if the resident parent has abandoned and rejected them (Larsen et al, 1984). If they fail to mourn the loss of the original family, they may resist their new parent (Crohn et al, 1981), and withdraw psychologically; at this point divided loyalty may arise due to natural loyalty to the non-custodial parent. Divided loyalties are also a problem when children have a strong liking for the step parent and feel guilt (McGoldrick et al, 1980). It takes approximately 2 years to adapt to the remarried family, depending on the child's age (Messinger, 1984). Issues include: continued mourning; guilt at causing the divorce; and giving up fantasies of parental reunion (Visher and Visher, 1979). In adolescence, the tasks are to move away from the family and develop autonomy which are at odds with reforming a new family (McGoldrick et al, 1980). Children must deal with a changed system now that there are new members in the house (Messinger, 1976). As the environment stabilizes, the children stabilize (Sager, 1983). They may have to give up responsibility and maturity as a step parent takes over, creating feelings of resentment (Messinger, 1976).

Canadian statistics reveal that in 1971, 20% of marriages ended in divorce, rising to 33% in 1985. In 1985, 27% of new spouses were remarrying for the second time with a trend towards a longer time between marriages. Demographically, divorce is more common in those who marry before age 20 and after age 30 (Statistics Canada, 1983, 1986, 1988). Implications of

these statistics indicate half a million Canadian children have experienced parental divorce in the last 10 years, 60% of them while still minors. In 1970, 85% of children lived with both parents, by 1982, 75% (Messinger, 1984).

From the literature review many inconsistencies emerged on the relationship between the influence of separation, divorce, and remarriage on children's functioning. While many of the studies discuss negative effects, others say their are no effects. Some studies state that long term effects demonstrate no difference other than slightly higher stress levels in children of divorce compared to children of intact families. Most striking are the Conclusion Studies of Ganong et al (1984), in which no evidence of differences emerge. In other studies many issues emerge which indicate definite detrimental effects on children experiencing divorce and remarriage. Factors which influence children's adjustment during divorce are: their age; the behaviour of their parents; and the degree of continued support. At remarriage, the factors which influence adaptation are: who the children identify as adult family members; and how these adults act.

My task now is to explore the impact of divorce and remarriage on the family, emphasizing the children's perspective, especially that of adolescent children age 12 to 19, and to attempt to align this data with the previous research findings. By identifying positive and negative influences from the perspective of the children, in relation to their experiences and relationships, from the time of separation and divorce through the single parent stage to the formation of the remarried family, a unique perspective will hopefully be gained.

The next chapter will present an overview of the Critical Incident Technique, which was an invaluable tool for gaining this perspective.

III. Methodology - An Overview of the Critical Incident Technique

The Critical Incident Technique emerged during World War II when an urgent need to select and train capable airmen was needed in a minimum time frame. Studies were performed to discover the reason why some men could fly without experiencing vertigo, while others could not. John Flanagan, a member of the Aviation Psychology Program, developed a method of intensive interviewing, aimed at pinpointing facts, in a straightforward manner, rather than by eliciting opinions. This direct and factual information gathering approach became the Critical Incident Technique, a collection of information based on direct observation rather than opinion, judgement, or generalization (Flanagan, 1984). While used only occasionally since the war, in recent years this technique has made a comeback in a variety of areas including work motivation study, quality of life, nursing, education, and management (Woolsey, 1972). According to Anderson and Nilsson (1964, in Woolsey, 1986) the Critical Incident Technique has been deemed a reliable and valid method of generating a detailed description of the content domain.

This method can be regarded as an effective way of generating data from occurences which have happened over a long period of time. The incidents which are deemed important during times of transition tend to stick out in the memory of the person very clearly, even years in the future; consequently they are easily recalled. They are considered as 'critical' when they are regarded as having had some kind of effect on a person's adaptation or nonadaptation, ie. they influence outcome. When logitudinal studies are not possible, this method poses a viable alternative.

An incident can be defined as an observable, human activity, which is sufficiently complete to permit inferences and predictions about the person who is performing the act (Rimon, 1979). Two principles apply:

i) It uses factual reports of behaviour rather than ratings, opinions, and general impressions.

ii) It includes only behaviours significant to the activity.

The five steps which follow outline the methodology being used in this thesis. These steps include:

a) Aim of the study.
b) Setting plans, specifications, and criteria.
c) Data collection.
d) Analysis of the data.
e) Reporting of the findings.

a) The Aim of This Study

The aim of this study was to interview the custodial biological parent, the step parent, and any adolescent children aged 12 to 19 who had lived in the remarried family for at least one year. (I chose this particular age range because of the nature of the interview questions, which required considerable articulation on the part of the subject. I felt these questions would be too difficult for younger age groups.) The interview was geared towards understanding the perceptions and dilemmas of life in the family for the children. Perspective was gained by interviewing both the parents and the children, as recommended in the section on methodological difficulties. Incidents which stood out as influential in the children's life at the time of divorce and again at the time of remarriage were the focus.

Factors in these incidents which helped or hindered the children's adaptation to life in the reconstituted family were closely examined.

b) Setting Plans, Specifications, and Criteria

I was the only observer. Before beginning each interview, I gave the interviewees a statement of the aim of the interview in order that they might reflect on the kind of questions I was going to ask (see Appendix I - *Critical Incident Technique Interview Guide*). Each family possessed at least some of the salient characteristics of the representative population in general. Demographic biological data on the family of the children in focus was collected including socio-economic status, occupation, and educational level.

Individual interviews were conducted with each of the relevant family members in their homes, at times based on their convenience. Interviews lasted an average of 1 and 1/4 hours, and each interview was recorded to avoid missing the important and salient points. To enhance the quality of the information collected respondents were encouraged to be highly descriptive and precise when discussing the salient events.

The experiences focused on were specifically the children's perceptions during the time of their parent's separation and divorce and later during the custodial parents remarriage. As mentioned, specific incidents that stick out during that time were explored and evaluated as being helpful or not helpful to that child's adjustment. Then the custodial parent and step parent were asked to focus on these periods, and to describe their relationships with their children and their view of the critical incidents which occurred.

c) Data Collection

To obtain my subjects, I initially advertised in several local papers (public service section), on two cable community service channels, and on printed posters distributed to community centers and posted throughout the University. However, all six of the families were located by friends.

Data was collected by the interview method. I used the first family to test applicability of the interview technique. As the technique was found to be a suitable method of collecting the applicable information, it was employed with the other families with a few changes (a few questions were reworded and some open ended questions were added). (See Appendix I - *Critical Incident Technique Interview Guide*)

Interviews were enhanced with the use of communication skills including paraphrasing and perception checking to verify that I had understood what had been said. I transcribed my tapes by hand and wrote up the important incidents on 6 by 4 cards to allow me to piece together the most important information that emerged. Vocal nuances and pertinent non-verbal cues were also noted during the interview.

d) Analysis of Data

To truly appreciate the family as a complete unit, in each family I interviewed multiple members to obtain multiple valid perceptions. This included the custodial parent(s), step parent(s) and live-in adolescent children. Children aged 12 to 19 years were used for the richness of data they could offer from the children's perspective. In a study by Amato and Ochiltree (1987) they found "the data provided by adolescents appeared to be

of a significantly better quality than that provided by younger children" (p 674).

Once I had finished my data collection I began the analysis of thematic content, using my carded incidents. My goal was to obtain "detailed, comprehensive and valid descriptions of the activity studied" (Woolsey, 1986, p 248). Following the recommendations of Woolsey (1986) I took three steps as follows:

a) I carefully chose the frame of reference to be used in developing the categories. The frame I chose was "The perceptions of children experiencing parental separation, divorce, and remarriage."

b) I developed my categories using the above frame of reference. These were developed inductively based on incidents that seemed to cluster together. They included: background incidents of importance; types and styles of relationships and their importance to the children; specific situations and contexts; agents who made a difference (friends, grandparents, teachers, subsidiary relations, etc.); sources that helped or hindered; emotional shifts; and outcomes. To verify these categories, an independent researcher was asked to sort a random sampling of incident cards. To obtain a degree of inter-rator reliability, this researcher was asked to select 20 cards randomly from my stack of 143 cards. He was then asked to read my descriptions of the categories, and select the best category for the incident. Feedback from this researcher allowed me to make minor revisions in the descriptions of some of the categories. At the second attempt 20 more cards were selected randomly and 85% inter-rater reliability was obtained (17 cards). From the

interviews 15 categories emerged and these were spread over 3 time frames: during separation and divorce (group 1); while a single parent family (group 2); and after remarriage (group 3). Self explanatory titles were employed.

c) I chose the level of generality of the categories. This was a trade-off between the number of categories and the number of subheadings in each category.

In practice these three steps were far from discrete. I chose a tentative frame of reference and some initial categories, then tried sorting a few incidents. As problems emerged with the classifying of incidents, I had to go back and repeat one or more of these steps. This process was repeated until all the incidents were sorted. Eventually, all significant aspects of each category were represented in the research findings.

The next chapter contains the fifth step (step e), a reporting of the findings of my research study.

IV. Findings of the Study

a) Demographic Data

Four types of remarried families participated in this study. Family type A had a custodial mother with children, married to a previously single man. Family type B was a blended family consisting of a custodial divorced father and a custodial divorced mother. Family type C was a custodial mother, with children from the first marriage and children from the present marriage, married to a previously single man. Family type D was a custodial father, with children from the first marriage and children from the present marriage, married to a previously single woman. The distribution was as follows:

Family	Type	No. People	No. Interviewed
1	A	4	4
2	A	4	3
3	B	8	6
4	C	5	4
5	C	4	3
6	D	7	4

All the families were white middle class. Pivotal dates in every instance were found to be the time of separation rather than the time of divorce, which was described as "just obtaining a piece of paper." Likewise, the formation of the new relationship by the custodial parent and the moving in of the new person were found to be more pivotal than the actual remarriage, which in all instances occurred later. All were either Canadian or naturalized Canadian citizens. The demographic data for each family follows.

Demographic Data for Family 1

Type: A (custodial mother with children married to a previously single man)

	Separation	Divorce	Formation of New Relationship	Remarriage	Interview
Date	1978	1979	1981	1981	1988
Age of child 1	8	9	11	11	19
Age of child 2	4	5	7	7	15

Occupation of step father: Very successful salesman

Occupation of custodial mother: Shop Assistant

Changes in mothers SES: After divorce, mother took 3 part-time jobs in order to support her family due to lack of financial support from biological father. Extreme financial distress was finally resolved by remarriage.

History of non-custodial father: Travelling musician who has seen his eldest child 3 or 4 times and his youngest child 1 or 2 times in the last 5 years. Almost no contact in previous years. Still single.

Demographic Data for Family 2

Type: A (custodial mother with children married to a previously single man)

	Separation	Divorce	Formation of New Relationship	Remarriage	Interview
Date	1979	1979	1981	1985	1989
Age of child 1	5	5	7	11	14
Age of child 2	3	3	5	9	12[1]

Occupation of custodial step father: Systems Analyst

Occupation of custodial mother: Clerical Officer

Changes in mothers SES: Remained stable, considerable raise when remarried.

History of non-custodial father: Biological father remains very involved with his children. They stay with him almost every weekend and holiday.

[1]Not interviewed

Demographic Data for Family 3

Type: B (blended family consisting of a custodial divorced father and a custodial divorced mother)

	Separation	Divorce	Formation of New Relationship	Remarriage	Interview
Date (father)	1985	1988	1987	1988	1989
Age of child 1	11	14	13	14	15
Age of child 2	9	12	11	12	13
Age of child 3	3	6	5	6	7[1]
Date (mother)	1985	1987	1987	1988	1989
Age of child 4	11	14	13	14	15
Age of child 5	9	12	11	12	13
Age of child 6	3	6	5	6	6[1]

Occupation of custodial father/ step father: High-ranking Government Official

Occupation of custodial mother/ step mother: Liaison Officer

Changes in custodial fathers SES: Stable and unchanged

Changes in custodial mothers SES No economic difficulties.

History of non-custodial mother: Married, no children. The two younger children visit her every weekend.

History of non-custodial father: Married to a divorcee with two children from a previous marriage. Still living in his children's old home. All three children visit him every weekend and holiday.

[1]Not interviewed

Demographic Data for Family 4

Type: C (custodial mother with children from the first marriage and children from the present marriage, step father previously single)

	Separation	Divorce	Formation of New Relationship	Remarriage	Interview
Date	1979	1980	1983	1984	1988
Age of child 1	7	8	11	12	16
Age of child 2	4	5	8	9	13
Age of child 3	-	-	-	-	8 months[1]

Occupation of step father: Unemployed due to illness

Occupation of custodial mother: Teaching professional

Changes in mothers SES: Full-time student at time of divorce. Husband is unemployed due to illness. She was receiving maternity benefits and is now working part-time only.

History of non-custodial father: A high ranking professional in a higher wage bracket. Now remarried with one child. Has full contact with both children. Visits with them every weekend (but not over night) and takes them on holidays.

[1]Not interviewed

Demographic Data for Family 5

Type: C (custodial mother with children from the first marriage and children from the present marriage, step father previously single)

	Separation	Divorce	Formation of New Relationship	Remarriage	Interview
Date	1974	1982	1981	1983	1989
Age of child 1	4	12	11	13	19
Age of child 2	-	-	-	-	3[1]

Occupation of step father: High ranking government official

Occupation of custodial mother: Social worker

Changes in mothers SES: Worked full-time to support child. No support from ex-husband. Status greatly improved with new husband.

History of non-custodial father: Remains single. Almost no contact with his son, to the extent of not even sending Christmas and Birthday cards.

[1]Not interviewed

Demographic Data for Family 6

Type: D (custodial father with children from the first marriage, children from the present marriage, step mother previously single)

	Separation	Divorce	Formation of New Relationship	Remarriage	Interview
Date	1981	1984	1982	1985	1989
Age of child 1	13	16	14	17	21[1]
Age of child 2	7	10	8	11	15
Age of child 3	5	8	6	9	13
Age of child 4	-	-	-	3	7[1]
Age of child 5	-	-	-	-	4[1]

Occupation of custodial father: Health professional

Occupation of step mother: Full-time housewife

Changes in fathers SES Severe financial difficulties following divorce required working full-time job and part-time job to pay house-keeper. Conditions greatly improved when wife moved in common-law and took over the running of the house.

History of non-custodial mother: Mentally ill woman living out of province with her parents. The children visit her during the summer. She is still single.

[1]Not interviewed

b) Description of Categories

The categories were split into 3 groups:

Group 1: Incidents during separation and divorce
Group 2: Incidents during the single parent years
Group 3: Incidents after formation of new relationship

Group 1: Incidents during separation and divorce

Category 1: *Witnessing Parental Conflict vs Non-conflict:* The degree of stress placed on the children and the negative reactions which resulted when they witnessed parental conflict. *Includes:* the degree of consequential relief when the parents separated; and the positive effect of smooth transition during separation in which no witnessed conflict occurred.

Category 2a: *Helpful People and Events:* General description of the people and events that helped in the transitions and adaptations to the single parent state.

Category 2b: *Unhelpful People and Events:* General description of the people and events that did not help in the transitions and adaptations to the single parent state.

Group 2: Incidents during the single parent years

Category 3: *Divided Loyalties Between Parents:* The conflict and guilt children felt when they either preferred one parent over the other, or took actions which they believed would result in the non-custodial parent believing they preferred the other parent. *Includes:* reactions to one parent talking derogatorily about the other parent; and having to choose between parents in a custody battle.

Category 4: *Witnessing Parental Conflict vs Non-conflict:* The degree of stress placed on children and the negative reaction which results when they witnessed parental conflict. *Includes:* the affect of ongoing parental conflict following divorce.

Category 5: *Absent/Present Parent: Includes:* the psychological distress experienced by the children at the absence or infrequent visitation of the non-custodial parent; the psychological distress experienced by the children at the absence of the custodial parent; the relief experienced at the continued presence and involvement of the non-custodial and custodial parents.

Category 6: *Handling of Stress:* Involves the stress on the custodial parent and children. *Includes:* acting-out behavior; grieving behavior; and failing grades.

Category 7: *Two Different Homes:* The adjusting to the routine of living in one household during the week and another on weekends.

Category 8a: ***Helpful People and Events:*** **General description of the people and events that helped in the transitions and adaptations occurring in the single parent state.**

Category 8b: ***Unhelpful People and Events:*** **General description of the people and events that did not help in the transitions and adaptations occurring in the single parent state.[1]**

[1]Note: no incidents fell into this category in this study. This category was kept for consistency with the same categories in the other two time frames.

Group 3: Incidents after formation of new relationship

Category 9: *Divided Loyalties Between Step Parent and Non-Custodial Parent:* The conflict and guilt children felt when they preferred the step parent over the non-custodial parent.

Category 10 *Discipline:* The problems associated with parental enforcement of rules within the home. *Includes:* adapting to new house rules; giving up responsibilities assumed during single parent years; receiving discipline from the step parent; coming to terms with the expectations of the step parent; the degree of acceptance by the parent of natural adolescent autonomy and rebellion.

Category 11: *Handling of Stress:* Involves the stress on the custodial parent, step parent, and children. *Includes:* acting-out behavior; grieving behavior; and failing grades.

Category 12: *Living with Step Siblings:* The stress or pleasure associated with sharing a home with step siblings or half siblings, the feelings of inferiority or intrusion that may have occurred.

Category 13a: *Successful Step Parent/Child Relationships:* The actions that lead to the establishment of an effective and integrated remarried family.

Category 13b: *Less successful Step Parent/Child Relationships::* Factors that contributed to the lack of an effective or integrated remarried family.

Category 14: ***Sharing the Parent:*** **Having to share the parent with the potential step parent; the effect on the children.**

Category 15a: ***Helpful People and Events:*** **General description of the people and events that helped in the transitions and adaptations to the remarried state.**

Category 15b: ***Unhelpful People and Events::*** **General description of the people and events that did not help in the transitions and adaptations to the remarried state.**

Frequency of Occurrence of Incidents

Group 1: Incidents during separation and divorce

	Cat 1	Cat 2a	Cat 2b
Fam 1	0	1	1
Fam 2	2	0	0
Fam 3	2	2	1
Fam 4	0	1	2
Fam 5	0	0	0
Fam 6	2	0	0
Totals	6	4	4

Group 2: Incidents during the single parent years

	Cat 3	Cat 4	Cat 5	Cat 6	Cat 7	Cat 8a	Cat 8b
Fam 1	0	0	4	3	0	0	0
Fam 2	2	2	0	2	1	2	0
Fam 3	0	0	2	1	2	2	0
Fam 4	4	0	2	0	0	0	0
Fam 5	0	0	8	0	0	2	0
Fam 6	2	1	1	0	0	2	0
Totals	8	3	17	6	3	8	0

Group 3: Incidents after formation of new relationship

	Cat 9	Cat 10	Cat 11	Cat 12	Cat 13a	Cat 13b	Cat 14	Cat 15a	Cat 15b
Fam 1	1	0	1	0	3	0	0	2	1
Fam 2	0	0	1	1	3	0	0	0	0
Fam 3	0	2	2	4	3	4	1	4	4
Fam 4	2	2	2	0	1	3	1	2	0
Fam 5	0	0	1	1	4	0	2	3	2
Fam 6	1	4	1	1	4	0	0	3	0
Totals	4	8	8	7	18	7	4	14	7

c) Reporting the Findings

Group 1: Incidents during separation and divorce

Category 1: Witnessing Parental Conflict vs Non-conflict:

The degree to which children were affected by the separation of their parents appeared to be directly related to the degree of conflict present in the family. This was true regardless of the age of the children. A 6 year old (now 14) remembered his parents fights vividly. He knew something was wrong, and greatly missed his father when his father stopped coming home. When his father was there, his parents fought incessantly. Eventually he was sat down and told of their decision to separate.

> "It helped to know what was wrong. ... I had thought that it was my fault that Dad was staying away from home. ... I felt better knowing what was wrong. I was sad, not angry."

This child felt relief once his parents separated, even though parental conflict continued after separation.

A child aged 7 (now 15) remembers his parents arguing, and also some violence; he believed his father was going to hurt his mother.

> "I remember them fighting. I used to run up to my room with my brothers when they started. I was really frightened. ... After Mom left, I really missed her and felt sad and alone because she wasn't there. ... [But] I was glad not to hear them fighting all the time. Everything was more peaceful."

A child aged 11 (now 15) described her reaction:

> "I was upset when they first told me, but I didn't make a fuss - I knew it wasn't my fault. They fought a lot, so actually it was a relief. ... They were better off separating because they weren't happy anyway. Life was better later. ... I had to take care of myself a lot more. It came naturally, I guess."

While the relief was experienced following her father's departure, in many ways the partial absence of her mother required she develop a greater maturity than her age warranted. Never-the-less, she never regretted their breakup.

Children who did not experience conflict were sometimes quite blasé about their parents separation. A child aged 9 (now 13) described it this way:

> "I went downstairs and knew what they were going to say. It didn't hit me at first, then it was okay. ... Many of my friends had gone through it - now it was our turn. It seemed normal. ... They had never gotten angry in front of us, so it wasn't that bad - I was a little sad. ... I knew I would see lots of Dad, and I soon got used to going backwards and forwards between Mom's and Dad's house. ... I got much closer to Dad after the divorce. Before I had been closer to Mom."

In this case no relief was experienced, because conflict had not been in the picture. Transition was easier because both parents remained involved.

Category 2a: Helpful People and Events

The people who generally seemed to help the most were parents who spent time doing things with their children. Outings did not have to be expensive or even imaginative affairs to stick in the children's mind for years. Sometimes, it was as simple as a trip to McDonald's with their father, an event described by 3 of the 12 children as helpful.

Pets played an important role to 2 children, both of whom received psychological comfort from relationships with their dogs. One child aged 8 (now 19) described it as follows (after just being told that his father was moving out):

> "My Old English sheep dog followed me upstairs, where I threw myself on the bed. He lay down on the bed with me, and appeared to understand what was going on. I felt better

> because he was there. He showed me he cared and I cried into his fur."

A child aged 7 (now 16) spent a week at WIN house following her mother's move from the home. She recalled playing happily with other children, even though she felt sad for her father at home all alone. She recalled her mother as being "incredibly supportive - we spent time together talking. I never considered her feelings at the time."

For other children interviewed, stability of the surroundings helped the most. For example:

> "I didn't mind them splitting too much - things stayed the same - we stayed in the same house, went to the same school, and saw Mom every weekend."

Category 2b: Unhelpful People and Events

Varied responses occurred in this category, such as the discovery of unpleasant information, created stress in the child. An 11 year old (now 15) discovered that her mother was having an affair. This distressed the girl for some time.

Not being able to say good-bye was stressful for a 7 year old (now 16) was not given the opportunity to say good-bye to her classmates:

> "I'd grown attached to them, and had had words with one boy - now I wouldn't get the opportunity to patch things up with him. ... I never saw any of those friends again"

This child likewise was not given the opportunity to say good-bye to her father:

> "I was thinking over and over about how my father would come home and find us all gone - finding the note, how he must have felt. It still bothers me today - when I'm in a depressed mood, that always gets me."

In this particular incident, the mother had not fully appreciated her daughter's sensitivity. Her daughter was so distraught at leaving her father that she only regained her equilibrium when they returned to Edmonton, where she could be with him.

In the same way that remaining in the same home added stability, instability was greatly increased when families were forced to move. As described by one child aged 9 (now 19):

> "I was bitter about the move - I had to leave all my friends and change schools. ... I've never been able to make friends quite as easily as at that school."

Group 2: Incidents during the single parent years

Category 3: Divided Loyalties between parents

One of the most stressful areas for the children after the breakup of their parents marriage was having the loyalty they felt for one parent placed in jeopardy by the actions of the other. This was particularly notable in the effects on children of one parent saying derogatory things about the other. Sometimes this backfired on the criticizing parent. One child aged 9 (now 16) said it this way:

> "He made fun of Mom and her boyfriend, and that made me lose respect for him. He wanted to talk about he and Mom's problems. ... He put ideas inside my head. ... This made me insecure, as I still loved him."

Sometimes the criticizing parent creates consternation in children, who then transfer this consternation to the other parent. The children then become confused by what was said. Of the 12 children, 4 had this experience. For example, one child aged 8 (now 16) said:

> "I felt some mistrust of Dad, because she did. She gave me her bias. I asked her if she still loved Dad, and she would complain about him, which upset me and made me angry with him."

A child aged 10 (now 15) returned home after visiting his mother to confront his father about being a 'drunkard and a drug abuser.' He had been quite gullible, and was very angry with his father. The father patiently and diplomatically handled the situation and obtained an explanation for this outburst. In making derogatorily statements about his father, his mother had distressed this child greatly.

This same child, according to his father, was later asked (by a court counsellor) which parent he wished to live with. The child had nightmares, and showed signs of extreme stress. After choosing to stay with his father, he felt extreme sadness at what his mother would think. The child said:

> "I felt closer to Mom, but I wanted to stay with my brothers - they were going to stay with Dad, so I had no choice. ... I wondered what she would think. I felt very guilty."

Another child aged 7 (now 16), who was also involved in a custody battle, felt like "an object [while living with her Mom]." In exasperation, one day she exclaimed "I might as well go live with Dad, nobody loves me here." This allowed her mother the insight to realize her daughter's opinions were not being sought. Acting on this revelation, she questioned her daughter and found that her daughter "felt love towards both us parents and wanted to be nice to both of us." Eventually, this resulted in a more amicable agreement between the parents.

Grandparents in one case had an adverse affect on their grand children, when they took sides in a parental dispute. One child aged 5 (now 14) confronted his mother upon returning from his grandparents house with "you don't believe in God because you got a divorce." He and his younger sister were very confused, and were unable to understand why their greatly loved grandmother was saying bad things about their greatly loved mother.

Category 4: Witnessing Parental Conflict vs Non-conflict

For two families, parental conflict continued after the separation and divorce of the parents. One child aged 6 (now 14) remembered:

> "father blew a stack [upon receiving a sheriff's notification of a petition for divorce] and waited for Mom to return home. ... He threw her against the wall. I was very frightened and ran upstairs."

This father was loud and abusive, and the children were very frightened of him. Later, this same father confronted their mother's boyfriend, and smashed the screen door. This child and his sister had nightmares for several months after. This was notable because this child now has problems at school with violent outbursts against other children.

Category 5: Absent/Present Parent

The single biggest concern in the single parent years, causing a great deal of pain, distress, and feelings of rejection, was the absence (or infrequent visiting) of the non-custodial parent. One child, now aged 19, spent his entire formative years, from age 4 1/2 to age 14, missing his father, whom he saw on rare occasions. When his father did see him, he would be thrilled. On returning from these outings however, he would be quiet and withdrawn for several days. He said, "I found it hard spending a whole day with my father, then having him go away again." He missed his father desperately, and also suffered psychologically from his father's insensitivity. For example, at age 6, his father collected him, took him out to the car, and introduced him to a lady and a young girl, who called his father "Daddy." He felt replaced and rejected. This same child attended a father/son Cub banquet with his mother, who was the only woman in attendance. Both were acutely embarrassed.

This family demonstrated how the devotion of a mother to the promotion of her son's happiness can pay off:

> "My relationship with my mother was really good. She was extremely caring, and always by my side. I missed having my Dad, and was angry at not seeing him, but Mom and I did everything together: skiing, the zoo, visiting museums, camping, skating, [and] hockey. I may not have had a dad, but I did everything my other friends did."

This child's mother related how this child pined for his father for years, but then his feelings of loss and loneliness turned to disillusionment. To this day, the mother and son remain extremely close.

A family with two boys had similar reactions to the loss, through separation, of their father. Their mother phoned their father to ask him to visit. He spoke to the boys, but they recognized his reasons for not visiting as weak excuses. They both reacted with feelings of rejection. The elder child, aged 9 (now 19), had been receiving piano and guitar lessons from his musician father:

> "The piano lay silent. There was no one to teach me, now my father wasn't home. I felt really miserable, and came to realize how much I miss my father, and how now I would never become a musician like him."

When his mother mentioned selling the piano, he realized that his parents would never get back together again.

Sometimes the separation of the parents creates financial stress in the custodial parent, so they have to work longer hours just when their children need them most. This happened in two families. Said one child, age 10 (now 15), "having only one parent, and he not always being around, made me really lonely. When I had problems, I had no one to tell them to." Another child, age 10 (now 13), instead of reacting with anxiety to the news of having step siblings, received the news with pleasure, but not for the anticipated reason:

> "I thought it was exciting having more people in the house. It had been very quiet around here. Dad used to get home very late, and my sister was out all the time."

Compare these stories to the reactions of 3 other children in single parent households, in which both the custodial and non-custodial parents were involved. One mom said:

> "They took the separation well. They saw their father on a regular basis. They knew where they could find either of us at any time, so they never felt abandoned in any way."

Another child, age 7 (now 16), felt life was much more stable after her parents divorce, and adapted well once she was able to see her father on a regular basis (which required that she and her mother return from Europe).

Category 6: Handling of Stress

Sometimes children appeared to be coping fine with the changed home situation, but actually were suffering greatly. This situation usually came to light through unusual behavior. This caused one mother to realize her son needed counselling in a serious way.

> "[my son] (age 5, now 14) had misbehaved, and I sent him to his room. It was three months after the separation. At 8 o'clock I received a phone call from his father saying that [my son] had phoned him and was on his way over there. I ran to his room and found it empty. It was -30 outside. I notified the police and went looking for him. I found him about half and hour later. He had his coat on over his pajamas. He said he wanted to be with his father."

When both parents sat down with this child, he expressed great loneliness and depression at the loss of his security. He had previously been reassuring to his mother when questioned about his feelings on this situation. His first question to his parents was to ask them if they would

ever get back together again. (They had recently been on more friendly terms, and he had misinterpreted this as a hopeful sign of their reunion.) Upon hearing this, he ventilated his anger, and was also faced with the reality of the situation, but he slowly adjusted. When his mother's boyfriend moved in, he gave up all hope of a reunion and got on with life.

Siblings can also take the stress they feel out on each other. Said one boy, age 9 (now 19):

> "My brother wanted to watch the other channel. I blew up and we had a shouting match. I called him various names. I felt like punching him. ... Later I felt sorry, and came to the strong realization of how much my family means to me, no matter what happens."

This child had spent the last 3 months, following his father's departure, sitting alone in his room looking out the window or laying on his bed.

> "For 3 months afterwards, I was really distant from Mom. I didn't want to do much with her. I still loved her. She knew that. I stayed in my room and stared out of the window and thought a lot."

His mother had allowed him to withdraw despite her being anxious for his psychological well being. Following the fight, she suggested they all go out to dinner, where each talked about their feelings about the situation. He, his brother, and their mother, mark this event as their turning point in their adaptation.

Sometimes parents became stressed, and took it out on their children. A 9 year old (now 19) said:

> "I came home late from school. I had stayed to get some homework done. When I got home, Mom was really angry with me, and didn't believe my excuse. She said 'Don't lie to me.' She then called the principal, who confirmed my story. She yelled upstairs for me to come down to supper. I never got

> an apology. ... I knew my father would never treat me that way."

At this point, this boy yearned for his idealized absent father, and was unable to appreciate the stress and difficulties his mother was experiencing. He was just resentful of her reactions.

One father, feeling very stressed, confronted his children: "He was telling us there was not enough time in the day, and he yelled how we were not appreciating what he was doing for us." His daughter, age 12 (now 15), confronted his behavior with "What are you getting so upset about nothing for?" Later she said she was able to appreciate his frustration, and the fact that he took it out on his children. Her father, upon realizing he had some problems, sat down and read a book on single parent families.

Category 7: Two Different Homes

Of the children in the sample, 3 were living in two different homes. For each of them, difficulties were encountered in the first few months. One child, age 5 (now 13) said:

> "I began travelling between Mom's house during the week and Dad's on the weekend. I would just get attached to one parent, when I would have to leave. I only had friends in Mom's area. I would much rather have stayed near them on the weekend."

A second child, age 11 (now 15) said:

> "I moved back and forth between Mom and Dad's every weekend. ... I kept forgetting to take my homework or clothes I needed on the weekend. It was inconvenient but I eventually got into the pattern of it."

A third child, the above child's sister, age 9 (now 13), said:

> "... having to pack every week, I hated it. Having to go to school from two different places. I felt like I was living in a hotel. ...

> Nothing was the same. ... I felt insecure. ... I'd always forget stuff that I needed for school. Mom would get angry. I wanted to get them back together again, even though I knew they weren't happy, just so that I wouldn't have to go through all this packing and unpacking."

These children admitted to eventually adapting quite well.

Category 8a: Helpful People and Events

For several of the families, people and occurrences emerged during this period as being of particular help. At age 6 (now 19) one child said: "My Mom got me a Big Brother. This was very important to my road to recovery." His mother agreed that this man helped her son "... in terms of his self esteem. He spent weekends skiing with his Brother, who was a ski instructor. He was a positive role model he could loosen up with and relax with."

For another child, age 7 (now 15), homemakers who came to look after him while his father was working made a big difference. "They cooked meals, and some of them were really nice to me. I liked them." His older brother and grandmother were also very supportive, and allowed him to talk about his mother.

For a girl, age 11 (now 15), new friends and a new boyfriend at a new school made the difference. At one friends home, she found the family atmosphere extremely comforting. "... because they treated me like one of the family." Her father took her out to supper one evening. "Just the two of us. I had him all to myself for once." She realized she still had her father's support.

For a young boy, age 5 (now 14), being included on a friends family fishing trip was helpful. The experience gave him comfort for several weeks during a period of loneliness.

This same boy and his younger sister had the experience of their father and their mother coming back together again for Christmas day, 3 months after the separation. "... we enjoyed it." For them, having their father demonstrate how much he cared allowed his children to realize that even though their parents marriage was over, their father was still their father.

Category 8b: Unhelpful People and Events

There were no incidents in this category, for this group of families.[1]

[1]Note: no incidents fell into this category in this study. This category was kept for consistency with the same categories in the other two time frames.

Group 3: Incidents after formation of new relationship

Category 9: Divided Loyalties between step parent and non-custodial parent

Within the context of the remarried family, this category is associated with the guilt children feel at liking the step parent. A child, age 6 (now 13), upon first being introduced to his future step mother, liked her immediately, but felt guilt about liking her quite so much. He had previously experienced the guilt of choosing to stay with his father, rather than with his mother. He continued to experience guilt at the time of interview.

Having the non-custodial biological parent and step parent come face to face was embarrassing for the children. A father came unexpectedly to visit his children, and found their step parent at home. Although he was very civil, the children found it hard to talk. They felt restrained from showing pleasure at their parents unannounced visit in front of the step parent. They even felt guilty about feeling the pleasure. Both children later asked their father not to call unexpectedly again.

A girl, age 11 (now 16), had her non-custodial parent express resentment of her new step father. While she understood his feelings, strangely her loyalty was felt towards her step father.

> "Dad asked me if I considered this man my father. He felt bad, as he was insecure about my feelings. ... He made fun of him. He was jealous. ... He took advantage of my feelings, which didn't make me feel any better. ... He's no good sometimes. He manipulates people. ... I still don't know what kind of a man he is. I can't be objective. I love him, but I don't like him."

Her view of her father changed following this talk, and their relationship deteriorated to some degree. She later confided to her step father that she would rather go to him with her problems.

Category 10 Discipline

Frequently children had assumed some responsibility while in the single parent family. When the step parent arrived on the scene, they may have had to give up this responsibility. Only one of the children, age 13 (now 15), related this as a problem:

> "I felt my position being usurped. I felt [my future step mother] was taking over the house. Previously I'd had control."

However, 4 of the parents or step parents mentioned this as a problem. One father related:

> "[My son] was 13 at the time we broke up. He took all the responsibility for his brothers, as I was working two jobs. He did all the baby sitting, and acted a lot older than he was. He helped with the cooking, and helped the house-keeper. Suddenly this woman was taking over. He was very suspicious of her. He didn't want to give up the responsibility to an outsider. He adapted quickly though, and became a typical teenager. We couldn't get him to do anything. He was soon confiding in his step mother."

For another child, age 11 (now 16), her step father described her adaptation as follows:

> "She was not used to me disciplining her. She began testing the limits. I had spent time working with teenagers, so I was comfortable in this role. With her father she's a prima donna. ... She and her mother are more friends. I maintain a distinct difference between parent and child."

He went on to describe his relationship with his step daughter as a successful one but still "like a cork bobbing in the ocean."

Of her step father, this child said:

> "I never feel for [my step dad] as Daddy. I have a father. ... If [my step dad] were my father, he'd have more authority over me. I obey my real father more than him. Sometimes he acts as if he thinks he's my father. I don't like that. ... I can talk to him easier than I can to Dad."

For another child, age 8 (now 15), anger was felt at his father's relationship with his future step mother. Said his step mother:

> "He kicked me. I was bruised, but I never criticized him for it. I said to him, that he could call me Mom if he liked. He didn't like the fact that I had equal power over him with his dad. Before, his dad had been his only disciplinarian. ... Suddenly, he started calling me Mom, and let me tuck him into bed. He let me know I had been accepted."

This step mother was sensitive to the child's feelings and did not try to push things.

Of two sisters, age 13 and 11 (now 15 and 13), their mother said:

> "They had to get to know their step father as someone to live with. He was vastly different in personality than their own father, and they had to get used to that. He was demanding, where their father is extremely easy going. ... They still don't get on with him as well as they could, and they feel hard done by because they can't get away with things here the way they can at their father's home."

Both these girls expressed a feeling that their step fathers expectations of them were totally unrealistic. Said the younger sister:

> "It was very difficult for me. I didn't want to leave the other house. The atmosphere was completely different here. We had to use their family rules when we moved in, which were very different from ours. ... The phone is unplugged at 10 o'clock, we can't play in the living room, we must take off our shoes at the door, we must abide by housekeeping duty rules. ... I'm not as free as I was. ... I'm uncomfortable around my step father. ... Mom changed completely, she started to go by his rules. She acted like him and agreed with him. She became much more strict."

It remained an unresolved problem one year after remarriage. This child said she was unhappy at the time of interview.

Category 11: Handling of Stress

As previously mentioned, the stress and anger children experienced during the time of transition was not always expressed verbally. In my study, 3 of the children acted out their feelings, and several of the children had a fall in school grades after their parent remarried, as the following examples given by parents illustrate:

One mother, said of her child age 11 (now 14):

> "He had an argument with another child at school. He picked him up and dropped him on his head. Then he attempted to strangle him."

This child had previously witnessed continued parental conflict. His continued feelings of anger were apparent during the interview.

A father described his son's (age 17, now 21) actions after his step mother moved in:

> "In grade 9 he had honors grades. Then he started drinking on school grounds and was suspended. He failed to return home, and we were frantic for 3 days, until we tracked him to a friends home. ... We never found out why he was so afraid to return home. He refused to express his feelings."

A father described his daughter's (age 14, now 15) behavior after her step mother moved in:

> "[My daughter] began a period of adolescent rebellion. She skipped school, lied about where she was sleeping over when she was supposed to be sleeping at a girlfriends. ... She got drunk on a friend's parent's booze. Now she has low school grades."

This girl revealed in interview that she was generally unhappy in the blended home, and had insufficient time with her father. Drug use was now suspected by her parents, and the general problems continued unresolved.

This girl's 13 year old brother ran away from home shortly after the remarriage, leaving a note saying "just think of it as one less mouth to feed." His parents had not realized he was unhappy at the family situation. When he returned, they questioned him on his feelings, and he said there were too many kids in the house and not enough time spent with each parent. He also felt the parents had too high expectation of him academically, after he received a poor report card. He acted out his feelings to bring attention to the fact that he was generally unhappy with the home situation. By the time of the interveiw he had settled down a little, but remained generally disenchanted with the home environment. His school grades had begun to rise.

A couple of the other children reported failing grades, while 2 children reported higher grades attributed to greater happiness in the home now that their parent has remarried.

Category 12: Living with Step Siblings

Only 1 of the 6 families was a blending of two families with children. The 2 families who were about to blend had both made successful transitions to the single parent household. Only after moving into the same house did problems emerge. This was because the mother's 3 children moved into the already existing home of the father's 3 children. Their ages corresponded almost exactly. A 14 year old (now 15) described it this way:

> "The kids already held it over us, that we didn't know what to do. We felt inferior to them; we were the guests. ... I talked with Mom about it. She told me it was as much our house as theirs, and not to let it bring me down. This helped a little, and I believed her, but I still felt a bit below them. ... It still doesn't feel like home. I can't do what I want. Everything's precious. ... It's not really my home, like Dad's home is."

Her mother's support and understanding was needed and was obtained, but this girl had still not come to terms with feeling at home. The house was a work of art, with beautiful furniture and objects d'art. It was not the kind of home in which 6 children could feel like playing or relaxing.

This girl's younger sister, age 12 (now 13), had a similar reaction:

> "I wanted them to be married so that I knew it was permanent. Before, everything was like we were visiting them, not like home. I felt very uncomfortable. It was their house. I felt like an intruder. ... We had to follow their rules. ... We didn't know what was ours."

It took a long time for this girl to feel even a little more comfortable. She expressed unhappiness, and a desire to live with her father or leave as soon as possible.

From the view point of the children already in the home, came feelings of being intruded upon, and a general lack of privacy. Said a 14 year old (now 15):

> "It was shocking when they moved in. ... I really didn't think they would get married until us kids grew up. ... I didn't adapt and I still haven't. ... If I had my choice, things would be back the way they had been after Mom left. ... I have got used to it a little bit."

The parents believed everything had gone quite well. Said the mother:

> "They were anxious to move in, and excited. ... They weren't losing their old home, as their Dad was moving in there. It went surprisingly well, like continuous sleep overs. ... It was exciting for the kids to be all together. ... They liked all eating

> together. Now we make that a ritual. ... There are some disagreements, but they all have adjusted to same."

These parents really tried to help their children adapt. They built extra bedrooms in the basement, so that each child could have a bedroom of his or her own - the girl's upstairs, the boy's downstairs. They talked with each child about that child's feelings, and the mother said that the children "are happy here."

However, the acceptance of new babies as half siblings seems to have been a very positive experience for the children of the 3 families in which this occurred. One boy, age 15 (now 19), expressed pleasure at having a little brother after years of growing up as an only child in a single parent family. In the second family, a baby was gladly accepted by her two older sisters, who were also very happy for their parent and step parent. In the third family the 2 boys were extremely fond of their half brother and half sister. No jealousy seems to be involved in any instance.

Category 13a: Successful Step Parent/Child Relationships

It is interesting to point out what actions step parents took to start a positive relationship with their step children. For the sake of organization, I discuss this family by family:

Family 1: They had a relatively easy time integrating as a remarried family. Their first year was the most difficult and involved "a courtship of 4 people" doing things together so that the couple was seldom alone. The step father accepted this as a necessity of the situation. This was a very successful step family of 7 1/2 years duration.

This step father, after moving into the family home for a trial run, discussed house rules and discipline issues with his future wife. They agreed that the mother would continue to be the main disciplinarian and the rules would remain unchanged. Only rarely did the step father interfere, and then only at the mother's request.

Shortly after his moving in a crisis occurred: he developed an allergy to their greatly loved dog. The reality that either he or the dog had to go was handled with sensitivity. He found a farm willing to take the dog, arranged several visits for them to ensure the dog was happy, and allowed them to ventilate their sadness freely. The older son, then 11 (now 19), "went to bed with a great big Pooh Bear he got me instead. I used to beat it up then cuddle it."

This step father also took both boys to football games, swimming, and other manly activities they had missed growing up with an absent father. He even took them out individually, which made a big impression on each. The older boy said, "I had him all to myself. It brought me closer to him. I had never done anything like this with my own dad." Both children felt closer to their step father than they ever had to their own father. They realized that he cared for them. The attitude of both was that 'it's great to have a man about the house.' All 3 watch television sports together as a kind of ritual.

The elder son had trouble with acting out behaviour (use of illegal drugs) at the age of 17. This behaviour subsided since the family moved to Edmonton from the East (one year prior to interview).

Family 2: They had an equally adaptable step father, but the 'excess baggage' from the previous marriage had repercussions on the older boy, now age 14. He was exposed to prolonged family conflict and has had some residual anger. At 11, he was very glad to have his step father move in:

> "I thought it was a great idea. Now I had a permanent man to look up to. He was fun to be around. I liked him. ... He was looser on the rules. We went to football games, movies, supper. ... We've had good talks, guy-to-guy, although I don't share my problems with him or anybody else. He explained to me why he and Mom were together, and this made me feel more comfortable with him being around. ... He enrolled me in Judo classes."

This step father adapted to his role in a buddy-buddy fashion with his step son. Being a laid-back, easy-going person himself, he and the boy's mother made a decision that she would continue with the main disciplining of the children; a system that worked quite well. It was a successful step family after 4 years. They said the first year year was the most difficult.

(For a discussion of Families 3 and 4, see Category 13b - *Less successful Step Parent/Child Relationships)*

Family 5: This was clearly a successful remarried family. The son, now aged 19, was establishing his natural autonomy, and slowly moving away from the home environment. The marriage was 6 years old, and full integration had occurred. The son described his reactions at age 13 as:

> "I was glad for Mom and myself, because now I had a father. She married the man who was perfect for her and for me. We have a good relationship. ... I have remained close to my Mom and I like my step father. I especially like the relationship they have together. It has given me peace of mind. ... It has taken time adjusting to a new father of course. ... I thought he was great and we grew together as a family. There's a good atmosphere between everyone."

This child experienced relief at his mother's remarriage, after years of them "being just the two of us." His step father was very active in integrating himself into a father-like relationship with his step son, though he left the task of discipline to the mother, with her agreement.

One of the step fathers first actions was to attend a school meeting with the principal to discuss some problems his future step son was having at school. His wife said: "This showed [my son] he was cared for, and he gained more confidence from having this extra support."

She continued:

> "[My son] was pleased to be formalizing our family structure. I feel he felt secure knowing his Dad was now legally his. Keeping his own name was a way of maintaining his own identity. It took us some time to click as a family. He experienced the pleasures of having a Dad, and also the obligations that come with a new relationship. ... His Dad helped him with newspaper rounds, took him to hockey, taught him to solder, to build radios, and set up a model train. ... They attended hockey functions as father and son. He was able to publicly show off his Dad and be like everybody else. He was much less self conscious."

Family 6: This family had also established positive family integration, due mainly to the extreme sensitivity of the step mother. The family was 7 years old. The biological parent (father) acted as the main disciplinarian, although the step mother would provide immediate discipline if it was warranted.

The two boys described why they liked their step mother. The 15 year old (11 at the time of remarriage) said:

> "I liked her. Dad said she was a lot stricter than him, so I worried about that. I found out this wasn't true. ... I felt good about her being here."

The 13 year old (9 at remarriage) said, "she treats me nice. Spoils me. If I ask for something, I get it."

Both of these boys referred to their step mother as 'Mom.'

Upon entering the family her philosophy had been quite simple. She referred to them as 'sons' immediately. She was hurt by the middle son's aggressive behavior (he kicked her), yet she understood his emotions at having another woman take his mothers place in his life. She gave him the choice of when to start accepting her. About the younger son she said:

> "He needed someone to baby him, so I babied him. He had been given everything he wanted. He yelled if he didn't get his own way. He wasn't used to hearing 'no.' I placed some controls on him, and he seemed to feel more secure. ... He began asking me to sleep over. He desperately needed a Mom, and I filled this need."

The father described what happened when his future wife moved in:

> "The home stabilized very quickly. We had more of a family orientation, and fewer problems. I had been very worried about the kids when I was working nights. [My new wife] was with them and this decreased my anxiety. This in turn decreased the stress on the kids."

Category 13b: Less successful Step Parent/Child Relationships

Two of the above families are still trying to adapt to the remarried state:

Family 3: This blended family had been living together for 1 year and was still in the process of integration, as previously described in category 12. From the parent's point of view things were going quite well and according to plan. From the children's point of view, none but the two youngest were happy. The 2 mother custody daughters interviewed described their relationship with their step father as difficult. Their step father realized

that not everything was great with these two girls. He said, "I cannot force myself on them, I just have to back off and wait." The two mother custody children interviewed also described problems with their step father. The 14 year old (now 15) said:

> "He's much stricter than our dad. ... He has strong opinions. He's really confident about himself, and he gets mad when we disagree with him. We have big, loud family discussions, but none of us kids win. ... We're not close. He wants us to be better known to each other. It's hard not to compare him with our dad."

The 12 year old (now 13) described it this way:

> "I don't talk to [my step father] at all. ... I don't know him at all. We've never had a good talk. Maybe things would be better if we did. ... He knows everything, so I have to keep my mouth closed. ... No one can give their opinion. ... I'm going to move out as soon as I can. I don't feel at home here."

The two interviewed father custody children also described problems with their step mother. The 14 year old (now 15) said:

> "I didn't care for her. I especially didn't like the way she treated [her second oldest daughter]. My relationship with my own mom had been strained. ... It improved, and suddenly I liked being with her. ... I had more attention from her than I got at home. ... Mom expressed unhappiness that another woman was living in her home. ... We were able to share our sorrow."

The other child, age 12 (now 13), said, "I felt reserved around her. I still do. ... I don't talk to her much. ... I really like Mom's boyfriend."

Both these children continued to feel uncomfortable around their step mother.

Family 4: It was very difficult to assess the degree of success in the relationships between the step father and his two step daughters. The 16

year old (12 at remarriage) admitted to respecting him and going to him with her problems. However, there were problems. This child's positive impressions of her step father were as follows:

> "... I can talk to him easier than my Dad. ... He has been the most honest with me. Most of the fights we have had have been because he thought me and [my sister] were being selfish. We let Mom do everything for us. I would hate him for telling us this, but I knew he was right. ... It had never occurred to me before, and he brought it out."

However, her mother said:

> "The relationship between [my daughter] and her step father is very strained. He always wins in any discussion they have about discipline and rules. ... He's much too rigid, after she's been used to an easy-going mother and father. She had expected it to be fun having him around, but she's found him too strict. ... It took her a couple of years to adapt."

The step father was equally defensive of his approach:

> "She respected me, but became more afraid of me because I'm an intellectual. I talk loudly and have high expectations. I expect her to be honest with herself. I want her to be grown up the way I [was] at her age. I think her mom over protects her. I want her to explore, see more, have more experiences. ... I took her to recitals, ballet. ... I stopped helping her with her homework because I ended up doing it. This made her feel inadequate, like she was letting me down. ... Now she knows what family love is all about. She sees her own father for what he is, an arrogant, pompous chauvinist. ... She takes advantage of her mother, which pisses me off. She tries to play one of us against the other."

This child's impression of her step father was as follows:

> "I've never thought of him as 'Dad' ... I want to impress him, because I feel he's very intelligent. I want him to think me intelligent. ... Of all my 3 parents, I want to impress him the most. ... I feel quite insecure about it I guess. ... He doesn't lavish attention on me like my parents do, and he doesn't always listen to me. ... I always want his attention. I've always felt secure with my parents feelings."

Her younger sister, 9 at remarriage (now 13), was much less positive and equally ambivalent about her step father:

> "I felt he was really mean. ... His voice is really stern, cruel. He yells at me. ... I don't like his attitude towards me. ... I'm scared because of the way he yells at people. ... He's touchy and short tempered. ... Sometimes I wished [my Mom] didn't marry him. ... I wish I could take this knife and stick it into his stomach. ... My life is so terrible."

However, she at times felt he was basically okay:

> "He lets me read his C. S. Lewis books, and helps me with my homework. ... I'm doing fine in school. ... He takes me for swimming lessons."

Of his younger step daughter, this step father said:

> "This child is totally undisciplined. Her Mom over protects her because she has a learning disability. ... She was still breast feeding her when she was 4 years old. ... She gets away with everything. She's her mother's child. ... She doesn't talk to me. It doesn't hurt, but I'd change it if I could. ... She may not be very bright, but she manipulated her mother. ... She lacks perception; she's egocentric."

This child's mother saw the major problems as caused by the step fathers approach to his youngest step daughter:

> "He speaks too fast for her. She doesn't understand what he says. She gets really angry with him, but doesn't say it directly. Instead she whispers her anger to me, or writes it in her journal."

Obviously this child was very unhappy with the unrealistic expectations imposed on her by her step father. He freely labeled her as 'not bright,' 'lacking perception,' and 'egocentric.' While his concern for her was obvious, he lacked the sensitivity, and ability to approach her at a child's level of needs prevented the establishment of any kind of pleasant relationship. The two parents felt obvious conflict and disagreement in the

ways to deal with the children; conflict which must have been felt by each child.

Category 14: Sharing the Parent:

Of the children, 3 had problems sharing their biological parent with their step parent. Said a 12 year old (now 16):

> "I felt unsure about it. I worried I would have no time alone with Mom and my sister. I wouldn't be able to count on her as much."

A father felt guilty when his 14 year old (now 15) said, "Daddy, since all those other people moved in you don't talk to us any more." After this conversation, he made a point of taking his own children out for supper, to talk.

The remarriage gave some concern to one boy, who had spent 9 years living in a single parent household. His mother described it as follows:

> "He had additional attention from his step father, but was threatened because he had to share my time and affection after a long period of having me all to himself."

Category 15a: Helpful People and Events

When the children were asked about positive events that helped to form the feeling of family, many of them were quick to express happy events associated with holidays. A 14 year old (now 15) said, "we went to an island cottage. It was isolated, so we had to entertain each other. We spent a lot of time together. It was our first time as a family group." An 11 year old (now 15) said, "we travelled on a camping holiday to B.C.. The whole family. No one was afraid to get dirty. We cooked big meals on the campfire. I felt

more like part of the family." A 14 year old (now 15) said, "we went on ski trip to Fortress Mountain, then out to dinner. It was an exciting day. Doing things together was really helpful to me." An 11 year old (now 19) said, "we went to Hidden Ridge on a ski vacation together. It was the first time I had skied downhill. I fell and twisted my leg, and was on crutches for 2 weeks. I still had a great time. We talked about it for weeks and weeks afterwards."

To some children, their parents remarrying solved severe financial difficulties. When one mother remarried, she was able to give up her 3 part time jobs, and spend time with her children. Both were overjoyed with this. They also moved to a new home and new school, and developed new friends. They expressed feelings of security. One stated he was happy for the first time in a long time.

One girl, age 12 (now 16), said what helped most was:

> "My best friend lived down the block. She was always there for me. We had fun together. She was the leader, and I needed that at the time. Her parents were divorced too. ... At that time I was placed in an enrichment program. I really liked the new teacher. He was nice to me. It felt good to get the prestige and recognition. I felt I was considered very smart. ... I was considered really nice, because I didn't pass judgement on other kids."

For a 14 year old (now 15), her non-custodial father and his girlfriend gave her support:

> "The relationship with my Dad had remained really good. I liked his girlfriend. We talked and she understood what I was going through. She works as a psychotherapist. I thought of going to live with them, but then I'd have to leave my brother and sister."

For 2 children, age 11 and 9 (now 15 and 13), receiving new step grandparents was a positive event, as their step mother recalled:

> "They told them to call them 'grandma' and 'grand dad.' They got them involved in all sorts of activities like baking and toy making. Suddenly they had another set of grandparents. ... Not outsiders, they were part of the family. One more group of people who cared about them. The kids thought it was really nice."

For a boy aged 13 (now 19), moving into a house after living in an apartment all his life was the best event of all. "I felt more like other kids." Having extended step family siblings who included him in their lives gave him an added feeling of family.

Category 15b: Unhelpful People and Events

Very few incidents emerged in this category during remarriage. An outstanding exception was expressed by a 12 year old girl (now 13):

> "My relationship with Mom changed. ... She changed greatly when we moved in here. She and [my step father] shared ideas together, but they were all his ideas. ... She took on his ideas after being really easy going when she was on her own. I was angry and upset that she had changed so much. I would prefer her to be the way she was before. I don't feel close to her anymore."

Other unhelpful problems were much less severe, and simply required adaptation (for example, to new schools). A mother said of her 13 year old (now 19):

> "He had to change schools and leave old friends. These had been providing his sense of belonging. This was a tremendous loss. He did manage to retain some of his old friends. He did make new friends quite quickly."

Minor difficulties emerged for a young boy, aged 11 (now 19):

> "[My step father] and I got up at the same time. He's grumpy first thing in the morning. He told me to go back to bed, but I needed to use the bathroom so that I could get to school on time. I got up earlier from then on, and played with my train set before going to school."

One set of parents, after reading books of advice about how to handle a remarried family, gathered the family together for a group session to find out the children's feelings. The Dad recalled:

> "They all refused to talk. We had to continue to deal with problems on an individual bases. We had to conclude that all kids are different. The books sound great in theory."

One girl, age 14 (now 15), said her father and step mother tried too hard to make them feel like a family:

> "We went to stay at a cottage. I kept being told by my father and [new step mother] that we were a family now. I felt they were pushing it down my throat. I felt like I was very hard to please."

The next chapter presents a summary and discussion of my findings with clinical implications.

V. Discussion

This chapter is broken into six parts:

a) A summary of my findings along with an alignment with the literature review and some conclusions.

b) A discussion of the findings with implications for parents and counsellors.

c) A short note referring to the objectives of the study.

d) The limitations and delimitations of the study.

e) The methodological difficulties experienced.

f) Recommendations and implications for future researchers.

a) Summary of Findings, Alignment with the Literature Review, and Conclusions

In this section I have aligned my findings with the research findings in the literature review. My summation of each category follows:

Parental Conflict (Categories 1 and 4)

This was perceived as one of the four most stressful experiences (along with *divided loyalties, absent parent,* and *discipline*) in families 2, 4, and 6, and continued in families 2 and 6 long after the divorce of the parents. These findings correspond with those of Lutz (1983). All the children experiencing conflict expressed some degree of relief at the end of the marriage. This corresponds with findings of Wallerstein et al (1980).

(Un)Helpful People and Events (Categories 2, 8, and 15)

Parents who helped their children to adapt spent time doing things with their children and explaining what was happening. They did things as a family, for example, going on holidays together. Events the children felt would have helped included: being allowed to say good-bye to parents, friends, or peers; and parents maintaining consistent behaviour after remarriage.

Divided Loyalty (Category 12)

This was perceived (in both of its forms) in varying degrees by 5 of the 6 families (not family 3). This corresponds strongly with the research findings of several studies (Lutz, 1983, Larsen et al, 1984, McGoldrick et al, 1980). During the times of divorce and single parenthood, it was exhibited as stress when one parent (or grand parent) spoke negatively about the

other parent, as experienced by families 2, 4, and 6. At remarriage, it was expressed in feelings of guilt towards the non-custodial parent when the children liked the step parent, as demonstrated in families 1, 4, 5, and 6.

Absent/Present Parent (Category 5)

Children suffer greatly from effects of an absent parent (Kelly, 1981) as poignantly described in families 1 and 5. A happy balance must be achieved in which conflict is diminished by amicable visiting and custody arrangements, which hopefully will encourage the non-custodial parent to continue active involvement with their children. This should allow children to achieve their best adjustment (Watson, 1981), as demonstrated in family 3 before the remarriage.

Handling of Stress (Categories 6 and 11)

Stress was experienced by all the children going through the transitions from separation and divorce to remarriage (McCombs, 1987). The degree of stress they experienced was not always dealt with constructively, and their anger was often acted-out in various ways, very much the way described by Wallerstein et al (1975). Behaviour exhibited included: running away from home (families 2 and 3), involvement in drinking and drugs (families 1, 3, and 6), school ground fights (family 2), and general fluctuations in school grades (most of the children at varying points of time).

Two Different Homes (Category 7)

This was perceived as a minor stress in my sample. This corresponds exactly with the findings of Lutz (1983). The children in families 2 and 3 experienced it and adapted fairly quickly. The main issues were: not being

with friends on the weekend; and not being organized and therefore forgetting things needed on the weekend.

Discipline (Category 10)

This emerged as a very stressful issue for children as supported in McGoldrick (1980) and Lutz (1983). In family 3 it was related to the enforcing of new rules and unrealistic expectations. In family 4, conflict was experienced between the parents over differing feelings on discipline styles, with the same issues as family 3. This was described by Wald (1981) as a problematic parenting issue.

Living with Step Siblings (Category 12)

This was stressful only to the blended family (family 3). The main problem was that one family with children moved into the residence of the other family with children. The children in the first family felt they were invading; the other children felt they were being intruded upon. This supports the studies of Messinger (1984) on Toronto families.

(Less) Successful Step Parent / Child Relationships (Category 13)

Successfully integrated step families in all cases had lived together longer than 4 years. Of the two less well integrated families, one (family 3) had been together only 1 year and was slowly adapting. Common characteristics of successfully integrated families were: the parents had discussed and mutually agreed upon rules and discipline styles; the parents had friendly and supportive step parent/step children relationships; they shared activities as a family and as small groups; the children were not pushed to integrate but given time to adapt; and difficult

issues were handled with sensitivity. These findings do not correspond to the study of integration in families by Duberman (1975).

Sharing the Parent (Category 14)

Of the 3 children who experienced difficulty sharing a parent, in one instance the single parent/child relationship was 9 years old, and both of the other 2 children were competing with 5 other children for parental attention.

Conclusions

In can be concluded from these findings that children who adjusted the best and the quickest to their parents separation and divorce were: exposed to as little conflict as possible; had long, frequent contact with their non-custodial parent; did not experience one parent talking negatively about the other; and had a deep, loving relationship with both parents. This was exhibited by the blended family (family 3) prior to the remarriage of their custodial parents. They experienced the least consequences in terms of somatic symptoms, dropping grades, acting-out, and depression. It was only after remarriage that the 4 children interviewed related having problems.

Children in remarried families who enjoyed continued relationships with their non-custodial parent and potentially positive relationships with their new step parents also adapted best to this further transition. The successful step parents in this sample were sensitive to their step children's needs, and did not try to push themselves psychologically onto the children. Instead, they shared special activities with them, and had realistic expectations of them.

The next section is a discussion of my findings with implications for parents and counsellors.

b) Discussion of the Findings with Implications for Parents and Counsellors

Introduction

From my findings, helping children through the pain of separation and divorce, then helping them adapt to their parents remarriage, requires that they be given an unbound degree of support, and an environment in which they can express their thoughts without judgement. This will help them to sort out their feelings. Allowing a period of withdrawal, and recognizing the children's feelings and thereby gaining insight, all seem to lead to quicker adaptation. For example, the mother who returned to Edmonton which allowed her daughter to continue her relationship with her father enabled that child to adapt. The expression of emotions needs to be actively encouraged, rather than casually enquired about. The latter may result in children saying "all is okay," when in fact it is not, and acting out behaviour may follow, as it did in 2 children in family 3, and the eldest child in families 1, 2 and 6.

Children require at least one adult to share their feelings of pain and loneliness, and also to set limits. This person does not have to be a parent, for example, the various housekeepers taking care of the children of family 6. Other adults can fill the needs of children when the parents cannot (because they are frequently in crisis themselves), for example the teacher, the school or family counsellor, or the school nurse. Children's needs must be recognized and promptly attended to. Once support has been

obtained, it should not be withdrawn as soon as the crisis seems to be over, but rather continued on a regular basis.

For family counsellors, it seems advisable that the initial stages of therapy take place with all members of the household present so that each members' perspective may be obtained, especially that of the children. The non-custodial parent may be of equal concern to the beneficial outcome of therapy. For the therapist to build trust, it may be necessary to see each person separately, or even have another counsellor see the other parent in cases of biological parents who are still fighting. The therapist should make it clear that the agenda is for helping the children within the household, and that the children's desires, hopes, and fears should be made clear. Goal setting should be geared to the fact that the single parent or remarried family cannot be the same as the original nuclear family (Sager et al, 1983).

Discussion of Categories 1 and 4 - Parental Conflict

Parental conflict was experienced by 3 families before divorce, and in 2 of these families it continued during the single parent family years. These children experienced relief at the conclusion of the marriage. It is easy to state that the solution to preventing stress on children is to protect them from witnessing conflict by not arguing in front of them, but this solution appears too simple.

One way to ease transition for the children might be for the parents to reach an amicable custody arrangement as quickly as possible. Shared or joint custody encourages both parents to assume active involvement. As we have seen, children suffer greatly at the absence of a parent. Wallerstein and

Kelly (1980) state that equal parental involvement is a key factor in children's adjustment. Many objections to joint custody do come forth, such as continued instability for children who must move between two sets of homes with different sets of lifestyles, rules, and values. In my sample, however, these children eventually adapted to some degree. It should be kept in mind that all the alternatives involve less contact with one biological parent.

The counsellors can do several things. They can tell children that they are not causing the conflict; the problem belongs to the parents, not them. They can advise parents and children that it is beneficial if children actively stay out of the way of the conflict scenario, so that they do not get pulled into the fray (two of the children witnessing conflict ran away from it, perhaps as an unconscious defense against such parental action). The children should never be used as a 'go between' to convey messages between non-communicating parents (Diamond, 1985), or used as scapegoats or as weapons against one spouse by the other (Visher and Visher, 1979). While little research on the effect of joint custody exist, counselling, both during divorce and after, so that the family can come to an appropriate decision without the intervention of the legal system, will result in less stress for all concerned, especially for the children. The children's desires should be given the greatest consideration.

Discussion of Categories 2, 8, and 15 - (Un)Helpful People and Events

There was substantial repetition in the events that helped children adjust to the time of separation and divorce. Several common themes appeared: having the parents explain what is happening during times of conflict,

giving the reasons why the family is breaking up; and parents spending time with their children on a single or group basis, in ways that did not need to be extravagant. Later, during remarriage: activities which involved the whole household (such as camping and skiing, which helped increase the children's acceptance of the transition); continued contact and shared activities with the non-custodial parent; and spending time with friends and their families.

Themes that emerged from a study of the unhelpful incidents include: the importance of allowing the children time to adjust, separate, and say good-bye to peers and other meaningful people in their lives, which seems to be important regardless of age; and consistency in the patterns of behaviour children have come to expect of their parents.

Discussion of Categories 3 and 9 - Divided Loyalties

This had two forms: the stress children felt when one parent talked negatively about the other parent (category 3); and the guilt experienced by children towards non-custodial parents when they had a liking for the step parents (category 9).

On the issue of divided loyalty, a lesson is to be learned from my findings: children are very susceptible to the guilt it induces. It can occur in two ways: created by parental actions or by the children's own sensitivity. All the children experienced divided loyalty to some degree, but it was relatively severe in 3 families, where it was induced by the parents. Parents are usually role models for their children, consequently the feelings children have towards their parents need to be respected. Children are part of both parents, and so have strong pulls to both:

> "As children and adults are able to accept the fact that children can care for more than two parental adults, then the children's loyalty conflicts can diminish and the new step parent relationship improve. ... Children may become caught in loyalty conflicts and feel personally insecure if specific critical remarks are made continuously about the parent" (Visher and Visher, 1982).

Parents whose children spend time in the other household are bound to question what goes on there - "Do they enjoy being with the other parent more than they enjoy being with me?," "Do they have more time to play with the children because they visit on the weekend?" Consequently, one parent may feel insecure. Visher and Visher (1982) strongly advise that children be given permission to care about *all* the adults in their lives, and to enjoy both households. In this way, children can freely talk to each parent about the other parent and the activities they enjoyed. The children should not have to be on guard for everything they say. This results in less tense parents and more cheerful children.

Counsellors can do several things to help. They can make the parents aware of the consequences of their actions when they talk in derogatory terms about each other. They can also point out that it is legitimate behaviour for children to remain silent in these situations, rather than placing themselves in the position of defending the other parent. A great deal of support may be needed so that children can express feelings of being torn apart by the divided loyalty.

Discussion of Category 5 - Absent/Present Parent

After divorce, non-custodial parents who lessen or stop active involvement with their children create extreme feelings of loss. Children frequently have feelings of rejection and abandonment by the parent and feel that they

are unlovable. Consequently, their self esteem is decreased. They sometimes withdraw from other family members in hurt and anger, and sometimes they act-out. The pain of the loss can be all consuming, creating depression and decreased school grades (Visher and Visher, 1982).

Custodial parents may feel anger at the absent parent for imposing this further pain on their children, but they should never talk derogatorily about the absent parent in front of the children, as this will cause further stress on the children. Instead, the parents can gain insight by looking at the psychological reasons for the other parent to be absent. This may be a job for the family counsellor.

When non-custodial parents in the literature were asked the reason for their prolonged absence of involvement, typically they described overwhelming feelings of loss, especially if they had limited access to their children. Many of these fathers withdrew from their children as a defence against these feelings. When they did see their children, it was not a joyous occasion, but rather a reminder of all they no longer had. This pain might make them move completely away from their children. The less time that parents spend with their children, the more they are likely to feel depreciated and devalued as parents, and the less motivated they are to continue their involvement with their children (Greif in Messinger, 1982).

Visits become strained affairs, as both parents and children feel tense and unspontaneous. The children are fearful that expressions of anger will stop their parent from visiting. Also, they feel restrained about getting to know their parent in case they miss them all the more. Parents are

likewise tense and are again faced with the degree of the loss (Heatherington & Cox, 1976).

Armed with this insight, it may be beneficial for parents to know that research repeatedly shows that children who adapt the best to the divorce of their parents have frequent, active involvement with the non-custodial parent and enjoy a rich, supportive relationship with both parents.

From a counselling perspective, parents should be given these facts. When they negotiate custody and visitation, these facts can be used as a moderating measure. Most parents, regardless of their anger at each other, want the best for their children, and perhaps the best way to achieve this is for non-custodial parents to have full access rights to their children. They also need to know that their ex-spouse will not deprive them of that access as a form of punishment.

If a non-custodial parent has full access, and still withdraws, the custodial parent must achieve an understanding of the feelings of sadness and anger the children are experiencing, even though the acting-out of these feelings in a destructive manner cannot be tolerated. Parents and counsellors can allow children to talk about the absent parent, while giving them support and encouragement. Children need to be told it is not their fault in any way that their parent is staying away; they should be given an explanation that something is going on inside the absent parent's mind.

Step parents also need the information that they can never take the place of a parent, even though they can still offer valid parenting. They may need help at accepting this as a fact (Visher and Visher, 1982).

Discussion of Categories 6 and 11 - Handling of Stress

The way that stress is handled by parents and children is directly related to the degree of adaptation obtained. Parents must have time for recreation and other pursuits to remain mentally stable. They should constantly monitor the degree of stress their children are experiencing and assess if their children are hiding their true feelings. If children are allowed to accumulate large amounts of stress, sooner or later feelings of frustration and anger will be acted out, as illustrated in my findings.

Flexibility is needed with younger children to enable the new family to develop boundaries. If children are allowed to express positive and negative feelings towards all parents, coping can become their task; otherwise their energies may become focused on anger (Carter et al, 1980).

Parents and counsellors need to remember that adolescent children, depending on their age, are reaching the natural time of breaking away from the family and establishing autonomy, a process which may be speeded up by family transitions. It is very natural for them to turn to peer groups for support, but because dependency needs continue, they still need the support of parents. Consequently, many adolescents are reluctant to spend effort towards becoming a member of the new family. Placing stress on them at such a time by requesting participation in family life can result in parent/child conflict. It is better if they are invited to share their ideas on how things are to be done, which gives them feelings of control.

Discussion of Category 7 - Two Different Homes

A problem children have is facing the reality of being involved in two separate households, with separate family boundaries. However, many positive aspects emerge from this dual membership; there are more loving adults, with a greater variety of role models, and a richer experience of life styles.

Children living in two different homes can be helped in many ways to speed up their happiness: the cooperation of parents in organizing the packing of the children's belongings on a weekly basis to help prevent some of the stress of moving back and forth between households; negotiating holidays and special occasions to avoid conflict; and negotiating some kind of consensus and compromise on rules, regulations, values, and social norms to prevent children from comparing easy-going with strict parenting styles, and the consequences of these comparisons.

Counsellors can help parents and children by instructing parents on how they talk about the households. The parent can then use the frame of reference of 'living with both sets of parents at different times,' rather than 'just visiting' one parent on the weekend and 'living' with the other parent during the week (Visher and Visher, 1979).

Discussion of Category 10 - Discipline

Discipline is generally recognized as a potential problem in remarried families. Opinions differ on how to handle this problem. Visher and Visher (1982) suggest that a written contract between biological and step parent be used to establish discipline, rules ,and regulations:

> "Both adults do need to support each others authority in the household. ... Unity in the couple is important to the functioning of the step family. When the spouses are comfortable with each other, differences between them in regards to the children can sometimes be worked out in the presence of the children, but at no time does it work out for either children or adults to let the children manipulate each adult separately and divide and conquer" (p 65).

Consensus however, may be an unrealistic expectation. My study suggests, from the 4 well integrated families, that parents and step parents can come to an understanding on discipline issues. In each case, the biological parent continued the major role as disciplinarian, although the step parent's opinions were sought.

Problems with discipline come easy to the remarried family. The step parent comes in from the outside and may take over from the elder child, who frequently has assumed some responsibility for the running of the house. The step parent also wants to be popular and friendly with the children to ensure the development of the relationship. Once the marriage takes place, step parents may take their role as disciplinarian more seriously.

In the case of families 3 and 4, the step father was much stricter than the biological parents, so resentment of these different norms and values was felt by all the step children. To prevent such issues from occurring, it would have been beneficial for the future parents to discuss their parenting styles, and to come to an acceptable agreement. According to one of the children in family 3, the mother simply took on the step fathers stricter views, which upset at least one of her children.

The parents in family 4 disagreed on discipline styles. They had several stresses including the father's ill health and unemployment, and a new baby. These stresses may have contributed to the lack of integration of this family. Both parents were well educated, intelligent, and obviously caring adults. They disagreed on the upbringing of the children. The undesirable behaviour of the children was only seen by the step father and not the mother. He let the children know his feelings about their behaviour which, under ordinary circumstances, would have given them the message that he noticed and cared about them. It was in the way he told them (by yelling) that the negative reactions occurred. That is, his discipline was interpreted by all as being from anger and *lack* of caring.

From a counselling perspective, this family illustrates what can go wrong. They would benefit from family counselling so that the step father may receive feedback on the realistic expectation of children's behaviour. The step father previously worked with delinquent teenagers, and may need reminding that his step children are not delinquents. The couple would benefit from instruction on how to talk together and on how to support each others actions in front of the children. If they could mutually decide on problem areas of discipline, then focus on those areas, things might improve. (For example, how much the children should help around the house, how often they should tidy up their room, etc.)

Visher and Visher (1982) recommend that, from the very first day as a step family, the limits of behaviour needs to be established, along with new rules, to avoid instant chaos. Children naturally test the limits and fight against change. Step parents cannot expect to be disciplinarians without some cooperation from the children, and force does not work. The authors

advise the reading of effective books on discipline, such as *How to Discipline with Love*, by F. Dodson.

Discussion of Category 12 - Living with Step Siblings

The two parents in the blended family (family 3) really sought out ways of helping the family adapt. They read books and applied the advice given. However, problems persisted as the techniques they attempted failed to work. In my estimation, it is not that the family failed to integrate, it just required more time (they had been together for only 1 year at the time of interview).

These parents did many things right. For one, the step siblings seemed to have an acceptable relationship between each other, and open hostility did not exist. None of the children felt that another was receiving preferential treatment, and so jealousy was not an issue. They had a few complaints about their parents, but these were not among them. The parents had rituals in which the family did things together, as popular books on this topic advise. (One girl felt they were trying too hard to establish a family spirit, and for her the plan may have backfired.) The parents did not hold one child up as a model for comparison for the other children. Instead, as the father stated, each child was treated as an individual, and the parents actively accepted the differences.

From a counselling perspective, this family needs to be instructed on the effects of a lack of a common past and culture. The mental images we have about our spouse's past lives helps in forming a context necessary to our relationship with them. The same applies to the newly remarried family. Once a common history has developed, alienation is reduced. In fact,

disequilibrium occurs because the formation of family feelings cannot be willed, but must evolve with time (Goldner in Messinger, 1982). In this family, the 4 teenager's natural developmental tasks were to move towards – autonomy, independence, and relationships outside the family, not towards deepening of family relationships. Instead, they were being forced to develop relationships not only with step parents, but also with step siblings.

This family was faced with two outstanding problems: one family moved into the other families home; and then had to follow the rules established by the father. Upon questioning the parents, it became obvious that they were aware of the dangers of one family moving into the home of another family. As Messinger (1984) states:

> "When possible, it is advisable for a couple, both with children to begin their marital life in a different home than either of the former matrimonial homes" (p 130).

If one family moves into the other families home:

> "One family might have felt they were being invaded, while the other might have felt they were intruders: in a new home everyone would be adapting" (ibid)

It is interesting to note that the words 'invaded' and 'intruders' were the very words used by children of this family.

From a counselling perspective, this family requires some reassurance that disagreements are inevitable. When they do occur, parents must remain neutral. The danger here is that children may misinterpret this as a change on the part of their parent, as happened in this family. Equal expectations of each child remain the mainstay. While the resident children had the same rules after remarriage, the children coming into this home had to conform to existing rules, creating feelings of inconstancy

towards their parent. New, mutually agreeable rules, should have been established thereby reducing stress (Visher and Visher, 1982). Messinger's advice against using an existing family dwelling would also have created less stress for these children

Discussion of Category 13 - (Less) Successful Step Parent/Child Relationships

The length of years the remarried family had existed was strongly correlated with the degree of family integration which occurred. All 4 of the families which were considered quite well integrated had been married for more than 4 years. (That is, the family members reported they were relatively happy, the atmosphere of the home was felt to be generally positive, the children were performing satisfactorily in school, and each had a positive step parent/step child relationship.) Of the other 2 less well integrated families, one, the blended family, had only been together for 1 year. The exception was family 4, which had been together for 4 years.

When correlating the genders of the step parent and step child, during analysis of the successful and less successful relationships, a pattern apparently emerged. Of the 7 boys, 6 had positive relationships with their step parents, while none of the girls had totally positive relationships with their step parents. However, further analysis showed the girls happened to belong to the 2 poorly integrated families, so that nothing can be concluded from the gender of the children. The most that can be said about this finding is that it does not contradict recent studies which show that step daughters have more difficulties accepting a step parent then boys do (Clingempeel et al, 1982).

Several common themes emerged from examining the positive step parent relationships in this sample. The parents and step parents had discussed values and feelings about discipline before they remarried; in the 4 successfully integrated remarried families the biological parents remained the main disciplinarians. The step parents had developed friendly relationships with their children. They had shared enjoyable activities both one-on-one and as a family. They had not tried to push themselves on the children, instead, they had allowed the children to decide when they were going to be accepted, as graphically illustrated in family 6. Difficult situations were handled with sensitivity, illustrated in family 1 when the allergic step father found a new home for the family dog, and also in family 6, when the new step mother was kicked (she was hurt both physically and emotionally, yet she tried to understand the reasons rather than focusing on this behaviour).

In the negative, or non-developed relationships, 2 of the 3 step parents in question were felt to be too strict or rigid; to have too high and too unrealistic expectations of their children. They were intolerant of behaviour that exhibited the natural anger their step children felt towards changes in their lives.

Counsellors can point out that successful relationships require time to evolve; disappointments and disagreements are bound to take place. The hopes and expectations of the custodial parent are naturally that children and step parent will like each other. They may become anxious if this is not going as easily as they had hoped, and this anxiety affects the functioning of the family as a whole. The children will decide when to accept the step parent.

Step parents need to learn to adapt to children in the same way that children must learn to adapt to them. Rules should be mutually agreed upon, rather than forced down the throats of the children. The children should not be molded into the ideals of the step parent; they are their own persons, and require respect and acknowledgement. From such thinking comes the acceptance of the children as they are.

To get to know their step children better, step parents can find out their hopes and desires for the future. Taking an interest in the hobbies their children pursue, may create a bond. Sharing special activities will do the same (Visher and Visher, 1982).

Discussion of Category 14 - Sharing the Parent

This was a relatively minor category, in that only 3 children expressed concerns about it. One child had his mother to himself for 9 years before remarriage, two others were each competing for attention with 5 other children. For some parents and children, the quality and intensity of their bond is so strong that neither can make room for the new partner.

From a counselling perspective, step parents should have the patience to allow the children to accept them naturally. Their own feelings may be strong, but they should not show either hostility or defensiveness towards the tight bonds keeping them out (Crohn et al in Messinger, 1982). If their patience pays off, the children will adapt to them, and they can concentrate on building a relationship in the ways recommended previously. They must allow the biological parent and children their own time together.

The next section is a short note about the objectives of my study.

c) A Summation of the Major Findings of this Study

Major findings of this study were:

- All the children perceived parental conflict as stressful. Those who experienced the greatest conflict experienced the greatest degree of relief at the separation of their parents.
- The children who experienced an absent or infrequently visiting non-custodial parent suffered feelings of loss, rejection, anger, profound sadness, and yearning for that parent. This sometimes lasted for years.
- Children who adapted well to parental divorce had the following things in common: they were exposed to minimal conflict; both parents were actively involved in their care; both parents spent quality time with the children; neither parent spoke negatively about the other; and the parents explained what was happening during separation and divorce.
- Issues related to divided loyalty were perceived as very stressful in two aspects: when one parent talked negatively to the children about the other; and when children felt guilty about liking the step parent.
- Living in two households during the single parent years was perceived as initially stressful by the children experiencing it, but was quickly adapted to. Issues included: not being with friends on the weekend; and forgetting needed articles.
- Discipline was perceived as stressful when step parents were seen as too strict and having unrealistic expectations.

- Successfully integrated families had all existed for longer than 4 years. Characteristics of these families included: friendly step parent/child relationships; mutual decision making between spouses on discipline and rules (the custodial parent remained the main disciplinarian); allowing the children to adapt at their own pace; sharing activities as a family; and handling difficult issues with sensitivity.

- The degree of acting-out behaviour exhibited by the children in this sample was slightly higher than would be expected in the general population, occurring in 5 out of the 12 children. It included: running away from home; school ground fighting; drinking; and taking illegal drugs.

d) A Note on the Objectives of the Study

In the introduction to this thesis I asked several questions. I have attempted to answer these questions in the discussions of my findings. The questions are repeated below. The parenthetical references, unless otherwise indicated, give the category headings in the previous section (*Discussion of the Findings with Implications for Parents and Counsellors*) in which some attempt was made to answer them. The questions were:

- What constituted successful and less successful relationships? (Category 13 - *(Less) Successful Step Parent/Child Relationships*)
- What did the children perceive to be the most stressful events during these transitions? (Categories 1 & 4 - *Parental Conflict*, 3 & 9 - *Divided Loyalties*, 5 - *Absent Parent*, and 10 - *Discipline*)
- What events did children find to be most helpful? (Category 2 & 8 & 15 - *Helpful People and Events*)
- What actions by adults did children find to be most helpful? (Alluded to in all categories)
- What constituted successful adaptation? (Conclusions in *Summary of Findings, Alignment with the Literature Review, and Conclusions*)
- What insights can be gained into how to create successful remarried families? (Throughout *Discussion of the Findings with Implications for Parents and Counsellors*)

The next section gives the limitations and delimitations of my study.

e) Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

My intent was to add, in a small way, to the existing research on the effects of, and adaptation of the family to, the transitions of separation, divorce, single parent family, and remarriage, while focusing on the children's perspective. My intent was not to give advice on how to succeed as a marital couple, but to offer insight to parents and counsellors on the various perceptions of children's lives during these transitions.

Limitations were evident in the degree of generalizability of results, due to the small size and non-randomness of the sample, the non-homogeneous family types involved, the lack of control for socio-economic status, and because the study was non-longitudinal.

Delimitations of the Critical Incident Technique became apparent during the collection of my data. While the collection of data remained objective, classification of the importance of each incident was quite subjective, especially in the interpretation of the meaning of the incidents attributed as important or unimportant. Several incidents reported were of such a general nature that they were deemed unbeneficial to the data analysis and were discarded.

However, this method did create a holistic perspective of the experiences and transitions the family undergoes during separation, divorce, and remarriage. The philosophy was that very important incidents stick out in the person's mind in the years ahead, and therefore are fully recalled. Consequently, a fairly broad picture of the relationships, reactions, and events that assisted or undermined the adjustment of the family from the perspective of the children was achieved. A side benefit of interviewing the

children in this study was that many of them seemed to obtain some catharsis from ventilating old angers, frustrations, and anxieties that they had not shared with their parents. In effect, they shared their stories with an empathetic stranger.

The next section describes some of the methodological difficulties encountered.

f) Methodological Issues Arising from this Study

While using the Critical Incident Technique I committed some preventable mistakes. In the hope of preventing future researchers from wasting precious time, I am including these difficulties here.

By far the most difficult aspect of the Critical Incident Technique was establishing suitable categories for all the relevant events and relationships. A great deal of overlap occurred, and required that I further divide the categories up into time frames. In my enthusiasm to begin analyzing my data I tried to skip a step, and for a whole week attempted to get the feel of emerging categories by reading my transcripts over and over and making notes to myself. In the end I became discouraged with the ultra-intricate formation of ideas, that could not be organized readily. At this point I followed the recommendations of the authors of the technique, and sat down to write incidents on 6 by 4 cards. This was extremely time consuming (24 writing hours when I had estimated 15). I found it was necessary to include a complete description of an incident before the incident could be categorized. At least 10 of the original 143 incidents could not be categorized and had to be discarded. Likewise, 8 or 9 incidents fell within two categories, but were usually only mentioned in one.

Difficulty was experienced when my own values came into play, especially after interviewing unhappy children. My views of what constituted normal family functioning were geared towards general happiness in the family and the ability of all members to talk freely. I constantly had to remind myself that the alternatives the children faced were possibly far worse.

The next section gives some recommendations to future researchers.

g) Recommendations and Implications for Future Researchers

Having 6 families with 24 people involved in this study gives a hint of the events that can occur in the children's life during family transition. No actual conclusions can be drawn from this small, non-representative, non-longitudinal sample of the population of remarried families. Faulty data analysis would have come very easily, especially when outstanding discrepancies arose during analysis of the data. (For example, step father/step daughter relationships were found to be less successful as compared to step father/step son relationships as explained in the Discussion of Category 13 in the section *Discussion of the Findings with Implications for Parents and Counsellors*.)

At the present time research on divorce, single parent family, and remarriage is far from conclusive due to the following problems: non-representative samples, non-longitudinal studies, and no large group of representative families. What is still needed is a number of large sample studies, in which representation of the population is controlled for, along with other variables such as types of single parent and remarried families containing descriptive demographic characteristics. The studies should be longitudinal, life-course designs consisting of multiple measures of satisfaction in children's happiness and well being, as well as parental, personal, and marital satisfaction. Measures for the outcome of children's well being would preferably include educational achievements, as these would appear to be indicative of the happiness and adaptation of the children in this sample. The rate of acting out behaviour would also seem indicative, as this was slightly more frequent in this sample than it would be in the general population. Comparing remarried families with nuclear

families has already been found unprofitable. Instead, comparisons of single parent and remarried families with the appropriate analog is warranted, ie. with conflict ridden and unhappy spousal nuclear families, which would be the actual alternatives for these families.

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Appendix I - Critical Incident Technique Interview Guide

Critical Incident Interview Guide[1]

Child

Separation and Divorce of Parents

Establishing the Aim

Focus:
"Please focus on your experience of your parents separation and divorce."

Separation and divorce criteria checks:
"How old were you when your mother and father first separated?"
"What did you think about the separation?"
"How did you feel about the separation?"
"How old were you when your mother and father divorced?"
"What did you think and how did you feel about the divorce?"
"What actually happened during the separation and divorce?"

Context:
"Think of your relationships with your mother and father during their separation and divorce."
"Describe your relationship with your mother."

"Describe your relationship with your father."

The Critical Incidents

Incidents:
"Please describe any particular incidents that helped you during the separation and divorce of your parents."
"Please describe any particular incidents that were difficult for you during the separation and divorce of your parents."

Effect of incident criteria checks: (Clarity and amount of communication.)
"How much time was spent with each parent during their separation and divorce?"
"How much of this was quality time?"
"Where you able to talk with your parents about any concerns you had?"

Additional information to clarify incidents:
"How was that particular incident helpful for you?"
"How was that particular incident difficult for you?"
"How did this affect your relationships with your mother, father, and other members of your family?"
"How did the rest of the members of your family react to this event?"

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[1]The guide was developed from the model in Woolsey, L. K. (1986). The Critical Incident Technique: An Innovative Qualitative Method of Research, *Canadian J. of Counseling Vol 20*, pp 242-254.

Critical Incident Interview Guide[1]

Child

Mother's [Father's] Remarriage

Establishing the Aim

Focus:
"Please focus on your experience of your mother's [father's] remarriage."

Remarriage criteria checks:
"How old were you when your mother [father] remarried?"
"What did you think about her [his] remarriage?"
"How did you feel about her [his] remarriage?"
"What actually happened during the remarriage of your mother [father]?"

Context:
"Think of your relationships with your mother, step father, father and step mother during mother's [father's] remarriage."
"Describe your relationship with your mother [step mother]?"

"Describe your relationship with your father [step father]?"

The Critical Incidents

Incidents:
"Please describe any particular incidents that helped you during the remarriage of your mother [father]."
"Please describe any particular incidents that were difficult for you during the remarriage of your mother [father]."

Effect of incident criteria checks: (Clarity and amount of communication.)
"How much time was spent with each parent [step parent] during the remarriage?"
"How much of this was quality time?"
"Where you able to talk with your parents [step parent] about any concerns you had?"

Additional information to clarify incidents:
"How was that particular incident helpful for you?"
"How was that particular incident difficult for you?"
"How did this affect your relationships with your mother, father, and other members of your family?"
"How did the rest of the members of your family react to this event?"

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[1]The guide was developed from the model in Woolsey, L. K. (1986). The Critical Incident Technique: An Innovative Qualitative Method of Research, *Canadian J. of Counseling Vol 20*, pp 242-254.

Critical Incident Interview Guide[1]
Custodial Biological Parent
Separation and Divorce

Establishing the Aim

Focus:
"Please focus on [child in focus's] experience of your separation and divorce."

Separation and divorce criteria checks:
"When were you first separated?"
"What did [child in focus] think about the separation?"
"How did [child in focus] feel about the separation?"
"When did you divorce?"
"What did [child in focus]think and how did [child in focus] feel about the divorce?"
"What actually happened during your separation and divorce?"

Context:
"Think of [child in focus's] relationships with you and your former spouse during your separation and divorce."
"What were these relationships like for [child in focus]?"

The Critical Incidents

Incidents:
"Please describe any particular incidents that helped [child in focus] during your separation and divorce."
"Please describe any particular incidents that were difficult for [child in focus] during your separation and divorce."

Effect of incident criteria checks: (Clarity and amount of communication.)
"How much time was spent with [child in focus] during your separation and divorce?"
"How much of this was quality time?"
"Was [child in focus] able to talk to you about any concerns?"

Additional information to clarify incidents:
"How was that particular incident helpful for [child in focus]?"
"How was that particular incident difficult for [child in focus]?"
"How did this affect [child in focus's] relationships with you, your former spouse, and other members of [child in focus's] family?"
"How did the rest of the members of [child in focus's] family react to this event?"

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[1]The guide was developed from the model in Woolsey, L. K. (1986). The Critical Incident Technique: An Innovative Qualitative Method of Research, *Canadian J. of Counseling Vol 20*, pp 242-254.

Critical Incident Interview Guide[1]
Custodial Biological Parent
Parent's Remarriage

Establishing the Aim

Focus:
"Please focus on [child in focus's] experience of your remarriage."

Remarriage criteria checks:
"When did you remarry?"
"What did [child in focus] think about your remarriage?"
"How did [child in focus] feel about your remarriage?"
"What actually happened during your remarriage?"

Context:
"Think of [child in focus's] relationships with you, your former spouse, and your new spouse during your remarriage."
"What were these relationships like for [child in focus]?"

The Critical Incidents

Incidents:
"Please describe any particular incidents that helped [child in focus] during your remarriage."
"Please describe any particular incidents that were difficult for [child in focus] during your remarriage."

Effect of incident criteria checks: (Clarity and amount of communication.)
"How much time was spent with [child in focus] during your remarriage?"
"How much of this was quality time?"
"Was [child in focus] able to talk to you about any concerns?"

Additional information to clarify incidents:
"How was that particular incident helpful for [child in focus]?"
"How was that particular incident difficult for [child in focus]?"
"How did this affect [child in focus's] relationships with you, your former spouse, your new spouse, and other members of [child in focus's] family?"
"How did the rest of the members of [child in focus's] family react to this event?"

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[1]The guide was developed from the model in Woolsey, L. K. (1986). The Critical Incident Technique: An Innovative Qualitative Method of Research, *Canadian J. of Counseling Vol 20*, pp 242-254.

Critical Incident Interview Guide[1]

Step Parent

Custodial Parent's Remarriage

Establishing the Aim

Focus:
"Please focus on [child in focus's] experience of your remarriage."

Remarriage criteria checks:
"When did you remarry?"
"What did [child in focus] think about your remarriage?"
"How did [child in focus] feel about your remarriage?"
"What actually happened during your remarriage?"

Context:
"Think of [child in focus's] relationships with you and your spouse during your remarriage."
"What were these relationships like for [child in focus]?"

The Critical Incidents

Incidents:
"Please describe any particular incidents that helped [child in focus] during your remarriage."
"Please describe any particular incidents that were difficult for [child in focus] during your remarriage."

Effect of incident criteria checks: (Clarity and amount of communication.)
"How much time was spent with [child in focus] during your remarriage?"
"How much of this was quality time?"
"Was [child in focus] able to talk to you about any concerns?"

Additional information to clarify incidents:
"How was that particular incident helpful for [child in focus]?"
"How was that particular incident difficult for [child in focus]?"
"How did this affect [child in focus's] relationships with you, your spouse, and other members of [child in focus's] family?"
"How did the rest of the members of [child in focus's] family react to this event?"

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[1]The guide was developed from the model in Woolsey, L. K. (1986). The Critical Incident Technique: An Innovative Qualitative Method of Research, *Canadian J. of Counseling Vol 20*, pp 242-254.